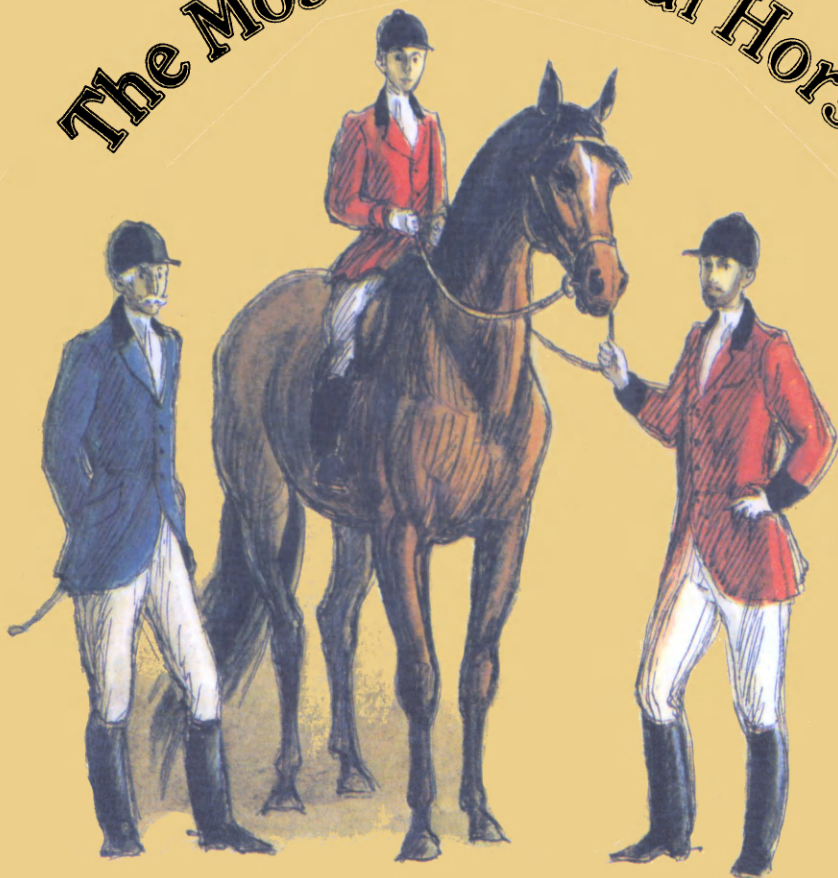
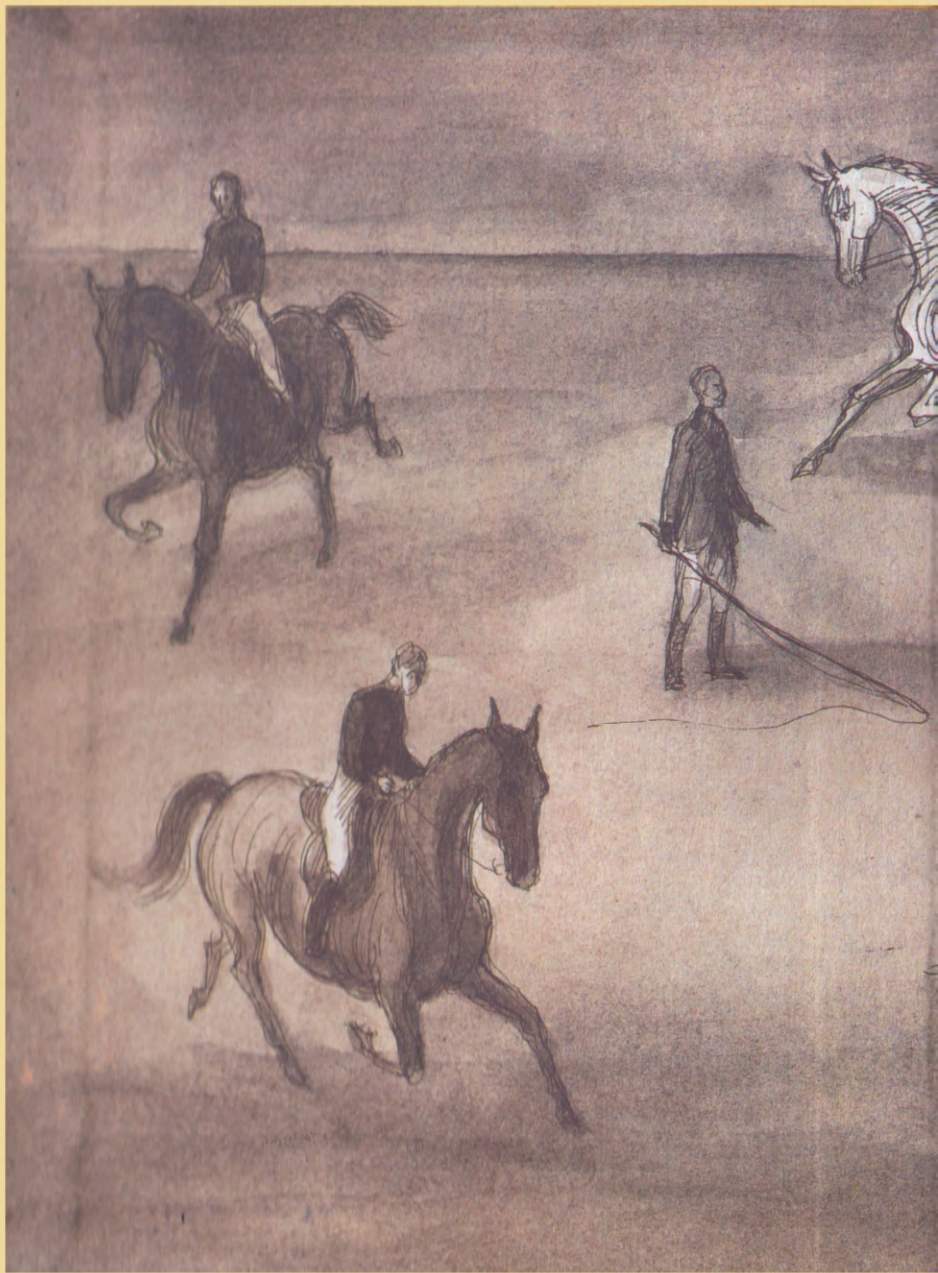


Boris Almazov

The Most Beautiful Horse



Raduga Publishers







**Translated from the Russian
by J. C. Butler**

Drawings by Nikita Rodionov



Boris Almazov

The Most Beautiful Horse



Raduga Publishers Moscow

Б. АЛМАЗОВ
САМЫЙ КРАСИВЫЙ КОНЬ
На английском языке

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CHAPTER ONE

WHY HE WAS NICKNAMED "PANAMA"

Sometimes he seemed as mad as a hatter. For instance, he'd be playing football, get the ball and send it flying through a window while his boot would go spinning through the goal posts. Out fishing he'd thread a worm onto his hook, wave his rod in the air and the worm would go flying down his collar while the hook, rod and a large piece of his trousers would end up far downstream.

And, of course, all his classmates would at once start yelling, "Oh, you blockhead—you're as mad as a hatter!"

That's why he did not like going to Young Pioneer camps, and this year he had spent the whole summer at home. One day he wandered round the school garden, pulling up weeds. The only trouble was, he left all the weeds and pulled up some good plants instead. Again he got shouted at: "Ponomarev, you idiot!" "Ponomarev's a thickhead!" And then someone called out, "Panama!"

And so his surname got changed to Panama and it stuck. He soon got used to it and started answering to it. Why, it wasn't such a bad nickname after all: there were others far worse.

And there was something else he had to contend with: he was constantly being late for school. He used to wake up early enough—at six, to be precise, when his dad got up to do his exercises. He left home on time but something or other always happened on the way. Once the tram's motor blew off and smoke started billowing out, the conductor began dashing about and the fire brigade came roaring up. Although he did not hang about to see what happened in the end, he was still late for school. Another time he spotted some cranes flying over the town on their way south and got so carried away watching them that he fell down an open manhole. Luckily for him, he did not break anything but it took him a very long time to get cleaned up.

And it was the same that morning too. He set off from home half an hour before lessons began and his school was only a stone's throw away. As he reckoned he had plenty of time to kill, he decided to walk round the block. After a couple of houses he turned the corner and by the scrap depot at once caught sight of a horse and an elderly grey-haired drayman perched on the cart's high front seat, reading a newspaper.

8 Panama walked round the horse which had

a long silky, plush coat, a devilish fringe flopping over its eyes and a sort of cheeky look on its face. Its bottom lip stuck out, one of its hind-legs was cocked, and all it seemed to lack was a drooping cigarette and guitar.

There were belts and ropes tied all over it and something hanging round its neck and some studded metal bars on its hooves.

"I say, what are those things on its feet?" asked Panama and added, "Excuse me, please." He always forgot to say that first.

The old man gazed down at him and said into the empty space ahead, "Lord, what times we live in, the wee lad's never seen a live horse before! Civilisation, I ask you! Those things are called shoes because, you see, they protect her feet from getting sore like our shoes do."

"Oh!" said Panama. "Thanks very much."

He walked round the horse again and the old man stared sadly after him from above his glasses. "Well? Do you like her?"

"Oh yes, very much!" replied Panama. "She's so beautiful and smells so lovely."

"Oh, laddie, you've never seen really beautiful horses." He folded his newspaper. "Now, my dad had three real beauties! Flew like birds they did. You see, I'm from a family of coachmen, and so I'm used to being 9

on the road. You know, in Peter the Great's* time a law was passed making coachmen exempt from taxes and from army service. In return, every coachman had to keep his post-horses in good fettle. And as a reward, he was given a plot of land to mow and was allowed to take whatever tip his passengers cared to give him. What splendid beasts those horses were! Why, they made such a din thundering through the gates that you thought the stone wall was going to come crashing down. Thunder, the one in the middle, was an Orlov trotter. It sometimes took two men to put him in his traces. And when he tossed his head up, they'd dangle in the air like limp rags. Sometimes on a cold winter's night there'd be a knock at the door and a voice'd call out: 'Get up, coachman, it's your turn to drive!' I was only a little lad then but I still remember watching from my bed high up on the stove as my dad got up and tied his sheepskin coat with a red sash, took his whip and the iron rod he used to protect himself against wicked people, and outside it'd be howling something terrible. You couldn't tell whether it was a blizzard blowing or wolves

10 * Peter I (1672—1725), Russian tsar, transformer of the old Russian Empire.—*Ed.*

howling. Terrifying it was... But the railroad ruined coachmen. Lines were laid in our parts and the coachmen found themselves out of work. And that's how progress began..."

He got out a packet of cigarettes and lit up. Panama stood still and gaped. It seemed to him that he could see the *troika* racing through the blizzards and snow, and the coachman with his red sash whistling and brandishing his whip.

"So the whole family moved with the horses to St. Petersburg*. We settled in Par-golovo, sold off two of the horses, and dad started work as a cabby with the third."

"Like you?" asked Panama.

"Why, no, laddie, I'm a drayman! My dad was a cabby, a real daredevil, too. In summer he drove a two-seater cart and in winter, a light sledge and he worked rather like a taxi does nowadays. Only not for long. Our horse went and fell, and dad was forced to go and work on the horse tramway."

"What was that?"

"Well, it was like a tramway, only it was pulled by horses. The driver stood on the small carriage's front platform and drove two

* St. Petersburg — the old name of the city of Leningrad.— *Ed.*

horses which pulled it along rails. Well, of course, it didn't go very fast but it was quite a smooth ride. You see, in those days the roads were still covered with cobblestones... Nowadays there're asphalt roads and cars everywhere but in those days there were only horses."

"Horses are better," said Panama. "May I stroke her?"

"Whyever not? Go ahead."

Panama stretched his hand up to the horse's head and she pricked up her ears and listened. And all of a sudden Panama longed to throw his arms round her neck and hug her friendly face with her velvety lips.

CHAPTER TWO THE STRANGE TEACHER

"So, you reckon, horses are better?" Panama heard a voice behind.

"Yes," he said, still reluctant to tear himself away from the horse. "A horse is a living creature and she comes when you call. But with cars, all you do is get in and drive off. A horse understands everything. Look, she's pricked up her ears because she isn't scared of me any more. She knows I won't do her any harm."

"Well, now tell me, Igor Ponomarev, why it is you are not in your sixth-form classroom?" asked the same voice.

And Panama, glancing round, saw his Russian language and literature teacher, Boris Stepanovich.

"Oh," he gasped. "What's the time? Excuse me, please."

"The first lesson will be over in fifteen minutes."

"Oh, you know, I've only dropped by here for a minute," he stammered. "I've only stopped to look at the horse. Oh, what a scatterbrain I am..."

"As soon as the lad spotted the horse, he forgot all about everything else in the world," said the old man with a smile.

"He's not the only one!" grinned Boris Stepanovich. Suddenly he put his briefcase between his knees and adeptly opened the horse's mouth with his hands. "So, old chap, your mare's eight years old?"

"Yes, she's eight," nodded the old man. "That's right."

"Isn't she a bit young to be lame in her hind legs?"

"Yes, she's got tendon trouble."

"Well, you should have kept an eye on her. And goodness knows what you feed 13

her on. And I won't say anything about her hooves. Why, the blacksmith deserves to be shot for doing a job like this."



"Ay, that's true, son," said the old man in an apologetic tone. "The blacksmith says he ain't got the right instrument. He hasn't got a file, he says".

"No it's a conscience he's lacking, not an instrument," Boris Stepanovich replied sternly. "He should try being shod like this himself. And I'll bring a file along myself. I'll give it to the scrapman and you can pick it up the next time you're here."

"Oh, thanks very much, thank you..." nodded the drayman. "You see, the blacksmith says his firm can't get hold of one for him."

"Well, then, he should buy one himself—they cost next to nothing! He's not mending a tractor, he's shoeing a living creature. Well, what mood are we in today, Ponomarev? Do we feel like dropping into school?"



"Oh, I only stopped here for a moment..."

"All right but what lesson have you missed?"

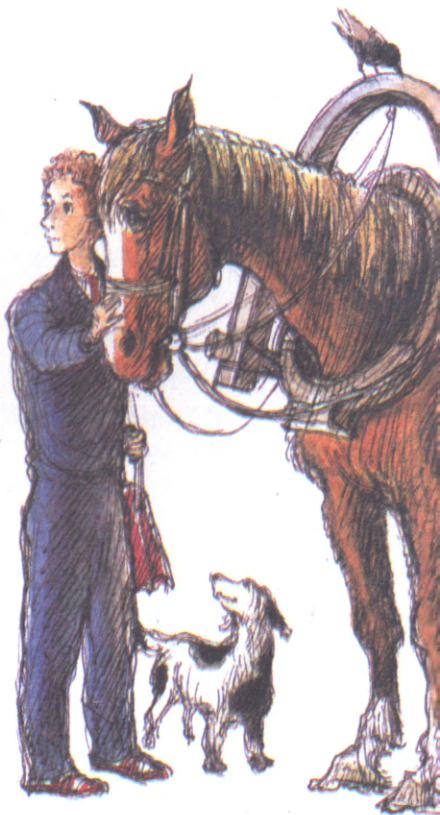
"Geography..." replied Panama, abashed.

"Oh, I see. Well, if you're asked any questions, just say I kept you back to tell you off for a test. By the way, do you ever glance in your Russian grammar book? I mean, just out of curiosity, say..."

Panama started examining the cracks in the asphalt. He felt his ears swelling up until they became huge and hot just like two pancakes stuck to his head.

"Well, make sure you're not late for your second lesson," said Boris Stepanovich and set off towards the school, striding along bouncily as if the heavy briefcase in his hand was as light as a feather.

Boris Stepanovich had started at the school last year. In his first lesson he had set a test and given



out twenty-two fail marks! More than any teacher before had given out! And that was just the start! Every day he gave them dictations and all sorts of entertaining games on the structure of words and he hung cross-words all over the classroom walls. Yes, it was fun having Boris Stepanovich as a teacher although it was terribly easy to get low marks, and somehow you felt awkward getting them from him. He would stare, it seemed, right through you and say, "Get up. Ponomarev, have you got a sense of humour?"

"Er, yes..."

The whole class would have already fallen silent.

"So, you were being funny when you wrote, 'The cranes mewled over the town?' Give me your daily report book. I want to leave you my autograph. And now would you please write the word 'mewled' up on the blackboard and explain what it means to the class..."

All the class started giggling and Panama felt like sinking right through the school's three storeys.

His briefcase was just like a magician's box: you never knew what he was going to produce next. Once he pulled out a plastic carrier containing pieces of carrot; another time, a whip with an ivory handle, and another some

sort of metal things, straps and buckles...

And once he came to the lesson in boots, a red jacket and white jodhpurs. Well, of course, he looked very impressive but you could not very well go about town dressed like that. He must have felt very embarrassed, too, because as soon as the bell rang, he dashed off, his boots clicking loudly, and dived straight into a taxi. The children would have asked another teacher why he was dressed up like that but if you asked him, he might reply in such a way that you would have wished you had not.

He used to stick his toes out when he walked along, and the older boys and all the top class started copying him.

"When I grow up, I'll definitely grow a beard like his," thought Panama, opening the heavy school door. "Not because it'll suit me but just for fun."

CHAPTER THREE

STOLBOV AND CO.

"Why did you miss geogo? We were shown a film!" asked Stolbov who sat next to Panama. "And I've got hold of a really great book on nineteen-century spies. Only trouble is, I don't know what it's called because the 17

beginning and end are missing and all it says is, 'to be continued in the next issue.'"

"Stolbov!"

Stolbov stopped talking but not for long.

"You see, there's one spy who's thought up a means of..."

"Stolbov, go and sit next to Fomina."

"Maria Alexandrovna, I won't do it again..."

"Did you hear me?"

Stolbov dragged his textbook and exercise-book off the desk and sauntered over to Yulia Fomina by the window. He wouldn't be able to chat to her because she always did her maths during history. She would prop her textbook up and do her sums behind it. Stolbov tried to listen to the teacher talking about pyramids in Ancient Egypt but it was dull because he had read right through their history textbook at the beginning of the year.

"I say," he whispered to Yulia Fomina, "in one of the houses that stand in our street lived doubting Foma whom we often did meet..."

Yulia shook her strong shiny fist at him behind her textbook.

It was better not to cross her as she was the strongest in the class. No wonder—she was a
18 figure-skater and just lived for sport! Before

you knew it, she'd be taking part in the world championships. Not long ago a coach had come to pick her up from school in a car.

Stolbov had watched her practising once. She had crashed onto the ice with a real whack, but had not cried and only bit her lip. But her coach had just snapped at her from the side, "Serves you right for hurrying! You keep trying to go into it too fast. Take it easy, take it easy... Try again!"

Then he had seen her skating on television with such ease that it all seemed a piece of cake.

"It must hurt to fall on the ice?" Stolbov had asked her then.

"Not a bit!"

"My, what will power!" thought Stolbov. "Even the teachers are scared of her. If she has to go to a training session, she just skips the last lesson without even asking permission. And when the headmaster bumps into her in the corridor, he always asks, 'Well, my dear, how are our achievements these days?' 'Our achievements!' Why, he probably has never put on skates in his life."

"Fine, thank you," she says looking as if butter would not melt in her mouth although she's quite different really, if the truth be known.

"At the championships she beat a German girl by something like a hundredth of a point. The German girl burst into tears and the whole of Europe watched her sobbing her eyes out on TV. It was a real pity, of course..."

"Weren't you sorry to beat that German girl?" he asked Yulia.

She gave him a hard stare and said, "The loser can cry for all I care. She's a grown woman so why should she act like a cry-baby?"

So that's Yulia Fomina for you! But her bosom pal, Masha Ugolkova, was quite different—even to look at. Whereas Yulia was tall and muscular and you could give her about fifteen, Masha was small, thin and round-shouldered. And how she blushed! When she was called up to the blackboard, she suddenly went as red as a beetroot. It wasn't even fun teasing her because she always burst into tears.

Now, someone who was fun to tease was Vasya Moslov. He had just been elected chairman of the class's Young Pioneer Organisation, and now he strutted about like a peacock with a preoccupied look on his face all day long as if his head was stuffed full of problems. But if the truth were known, he was a real layabout.

20 Last year Kolya Viunkov was chairman

and what a brilliant chairman he was too! He organised trips to the cinema and theatre and even put out a class broadsheet which was so good some six-formers nearly beat them up over it. But the only thing Vasya did was hold meetings, and they all lasted at least two hours. What a pity Viunkov and his parents had gone off to live in the north!

Stolbov tore a page out of his exercise-book and started drawing a picture of Moslov with a round head, button nose, shifty eyes—the way he looked when he was scared, and he was always scared. Now he was scared of getting it hot from the Young Pioneer leader, and now he was scared the others would elect someone else in his place. And what ears he had! Stolbov hadn't noticed them before. He gave him long donkey ears, and so that he wasn't mistaken for a rabbit, he decided to write a caption. To start off with, he wrote: "Vas the Ass!" He sat there pondering for a while because it did not seem good enough. Then he started composing verses and it worked! Yes, the result was just like a well-known fable:

*Our dear young Vas,
Is an ass among asses!
He's got to be head of the class
But he still remains an ass!*

Then he folded the picture in four and wrote: "Don't open! Strictly private! For Ponomariev, personally," and sent the note across the rows. Everyone, of course, peeped at it and laughed.

"Stolbov! Repeat my question and answer it."

"That's done it!" thought Stolbov, slowly getting to his feet... And then the bell rang.

Panama nearly split his sides laughing when he looked at the funny picture. The others gathered round and then suddenly Sapogov, who had stayed back a year, ran up, grabbed it, roared with laughter like an idiot and rushed over to Moslov with it.

"Look! My! Just look at that! What a picture!"

Vasya blushed and looked as black as thunder and then stormed over to Panama and demanded, "Did you do this?"

"Well, so what? It's all



completely true: 'He's got to be head of the class but he still remains an ass!'"

"Tear it up this minute! Right here in front of me!" ordered Vasya, trembling with rage.

"You must be joking!" Stolbov butted in. "Why, this is a work of art! It's a satirical drawing! An artistic satire! Who knows, in a hundred years time it may be hanging in some museum! Just you keep it, Vasya, for you'll make a mint in a hundred years or so."

"Right," said Moslov slowly, "I will keep it."

"That's it, Vasya, and the best of luck to you!" yelled Stolbov, jumping onto a desk.

Just at that moment in came Boris Stepanovich.

"I see!" he said gaily. "Now I see who'll be washing the desks down."

"Oh, I only just jumped onto it," protested Stolbov. "Other people are always running about them!"

"Well, they can wash them another time."

"Look, Boris Stepanovich," said Moslov, handing him the cartoon. "Look," he said with seeming pride. "Look how I've been insulted..."

It grew quiet all around.

"Well, if you've been insulted like this..." said the teacher.

"It means you really are an ass!" yelled Stolbov and giggled.

Boris Stepanovich glanced keenly at him and said, "Incidentally, the author of these verses considers that he and the rest of the class are asses too."

"How come?" asked Stolbov in surprise.

"Well, because he says, 'An ass among asses', and I can't understand why asses should be so annoyed that one of them's got to be head of the class. It's all good and fair, after all, because they don't deserve a lion as their head."

"How come?" Stolbov asked again.

"Because they're not even asses but just scared rabbits. You see, the verses aren't even signed. Whoever wrote them is a coward!"

Whereupon Stolbov wanted to exclaim, "You must be joking! It was me who wrote them and drew the picture. Look, there's nothing particularly bad about it—can't he take a joke!" but before he had time to open his mouth, Vasya Moslov jumped up and shouted, "It was Ponomarev who did it! Ponomarev!"

"You mean, he writes letters to himself?" asked the teacher. "The note's addressed to

"He did that to put us off the scent."

"No, that's illogical. Now calm down," Boris Stepanovich folded his hands behind his back and started pacing up and down the room. "What aggrieves me most is not that you can't joke properly but that you can't see what's funny and what's insulting. Goodness, how slowly you're growing up and getting wise to things."

"But Pushkin used to draw caricatures, too," said Stolbov.

"At your age Pushkin could speak French and Latin fluently and was friends with the most intelligent man of his time—the philosopher, Chaadayev... But as far as I can see, you live every day as it comes with no concern for the past or future. Why, most of you aren't seriously interested in anything... Even the public spirit, and I'm not afraid of using this expression, even the public spirit of your class doesn't concern you... Oh well, never mind!" He wiped his brow wearily. "Well, since we've started talking about fables today, we'll interrupt our programme and continue discussing them. Now, one has to learn the art of writing fables because they are governed by specific laws... In Ancient Greece there once lived an old limp slave by the name of Aesop..."

In the break Moslov came up to Panama, shook his fist at him and said, "I'll teach you how to draw caricatures, I will!"

CHAPTER FOUR

"THAT'S THE WAY IT IS, LAD..."

Panama had lost his running shorts so he could not possibly go to the PT lesson. His other shorts were no good. He had grown out of his old shorts and the underpants he was now wearing were a cause of embarrassment to him. You see, they were covered with a small flower print. His mother had bought lots of this material and sewn his underpants out of it as well.

He wandered along the corridor. All the others had gone off to PT for it just so happened that the fourth and fifth lessons that day were PT. He could have gone home but there was nothing to do there as his family was still at work. He was wandering cautiously around the school in case he bumped into the head teacher when all of a sudden a pale and anxious-looking Boris Stepanovich came rushing out of the teachers' room and dashed into a classroom. It at once became quiet in there. He said something to the class and then

course, a rumpus broke out in the classroom and someone even started crowing. Trust the eighth form!

Then Boris Stepanovich came flying out again and said, "Well, what am I going to do, I can't get through by phone. He's just vanished into thin air!" And then he suddenly caught sight of Panama and said, "What are you doing here?"

Panama explained all about his shorts.

"That's very lucky, I mean, very unlucky, isn't it! And come to think of it, this is the second time this month I have caught you skipping lessons. Mark my words, no good will come of this."

"Well, it's not my fault..." Panama stammered.

"Now, listen here," said Boris Stepanovich, "can you help me out?"

"Of course," replied Panama.

"Well, of course, as a teacher I'm not meant to... I've no right to, I mean, generally speaking. We're strictly forbidden to send pupils off on odd jobs for us but this is a matter of life and death. That's the way it is, lad... Here's some money and the address. Take a taxi. If the caretaker won't let you in, dial this number. And hand this note to Piotr Grigorievich in person. Got it? To him only!"

There were several taxis standing at the rank. They had obviously been there for quite some time as they were strewn with yellow leaves. The driver of the taxi in front was reading a book. Panama opened the door resolutely, got into the passenger's seat and handing him the note, said, "Hello, could you please take me to this address..."

"Right!" said the driver and started to move off from the rank. "A dog, is it?" he asked when they were speeding along the street.

"Where?" asked Panama.

"I mean, being seen to?"

"Who by?"

The driver gave him a rather odd look.

"I mean, why are you going to the institute?"

"What institute?"

"Well, do you at least know where you're going?"

"What it says," replied Panama, staring straight ahead.

"It says 'The Veterinary Institute' so I'm asking you if it's your dog that's sick?"

"No," replied Panama, "I've got a letter..."

"Oh, that's another matter," said the driver. "You see, I've driven a vet around a couple of times. A real joke it was! Once it was to see some pups which were cutting teeth, an-

other time to a cat which couldn't deliver its kittens. They were all panicking like mad. And one man I drove was almost in tears because his fish had got sick! And you know, these fish weren't worth a penny and they weren't even big enough to fry either!"

Somehow this made Panama feel very depressed and much to his surprise, he suddenly exclaimed, "Well, I've got fish too!" Although this was not true.

"You're a young fellow, you're different. But this was a grown man acting like a kid!"

Panama was pleased when they arrived. He jumped out of the taxi and energetically pushed open the institute door but his heart was pounding like mad.

A fat woman with a huge holster on her side was standing in the large hall behind nickel-plated railings.

"I say, excuse me, please! May I see Piotr Grigorievich Nikolayev?"

"Have you ordered a pass?" barked the woman.

"No, I've come with a letter," said Panama as politely as possible.

"Use the phone!"

Panama dialled the number on the note.

"May I speak to Piotr Grigorievich, excuse me, please..."

"He's out!" And the pips went.

Panama dialled the number again.

"But where is Piotr Grigorievich? Excuse me, please."

"At a conference!" And the pips went again.

"Excuse me," said Panama to the woman on duty. "I'm on important business. May I deliver this letter?"

"Leave it here at the checkout. I'll hand it over when he goes home."

"Boris Stepanovich told me to hand it over personally. Look, this is very important! May I go in? I'll leave you my satchel as a guarantee."

"What do I need your satchel and your messy books for! I've told you, I won't let you in without a pass, so you can go away!"

As Panama went out into the street, the swing door struck him painfully across the back. He sat down on a bench and set to thinking. "Oh, I'm absolutely useless. Boris Stepanovich went rushing into the teachers' room from the classroom, looking as white as a ghost, and I can't even hand his letter over... I'm a dead loss!" And there was already a lump in his throat.

All of a sudden a strange-looking vehicle drew up. Large and round, it was a cross
30 between a bus and a lorry... Its driver jumped

down with a handful of papers and ran inside the institute. Then a man in a padded jacket got out of the back and also went inside, leaving the door open.

Panama's heart missed a beat. He stood up, sniffing, and slowly sauntered over to the vehicle, the blood pulsating in his ears. He slowly got up into the back and slammed the door behind.

It was dark and smelt like a circus inside and he could hear someone breathing.

"What if they're tigers?" he thought anxiously and nearly squealed in fright. He leant back heavily against the iron door and tried to squash himself against it and become tiny and inconspicuous. And then he heard something behind the partition in front, stamping its feet and a shrill protracted neigh.

"Why, they're horses! Horses!" Panama came to his senses and only then felt his shirt was wet with perspiration. He stuck his hand out into the darkness and felt a warm horse's coat with his fingers. A horse's silky lips nuzzled his palm.

The vehicle jolted forwards and stopped. The door swung open and a hoarse voice called out in the blinding light, "Bring the stallion out of the first stall."

CHAPTER FIVE

"WHAT KIND OF DR. DOOLITTLE ARE YOU!"

Panama stood still, blinking and getting used to the light. He was surrounded by iron partitions over which horses' heads were sticking out. He had a good look round, opened the door and found himself in a passageway directly behind the horse which was being led out. He quietly sneaked out after him and nobody spotted him. But where should he go now?

Some people in white overcoats were standing with their backs to him in the yard not far from the vehicle and listening to someone in their midst. Although Panama could not see him, he overheard what he was saying: "For the first time in the world an industrial installation has been set up in our institute for obtaining gastric juice and making preparations from horses' blood. The gastric juice is taken once or twice a week, six or seven litres at a time. After being processed, it is sent to medical institutions. To obtain the preparations from the blood we proceed in the following manner: pathogenic toxins of such dangerous diseases as gangrene, tetanus, diphtheria and a whole range of others, which
32 medicine has been so far unable to tackle

satisfactorily are introduced into the blood of completely fit and thoroughly checked over horses. Antibodies form in the blood of the affected animals. From this blood we obtain a serum which not only cures sick people but also makes a person immune to the disease. From the blood of one horse, we can obtain as many as sixteen to twenty thousand doses of the serum."

"Pleeze till mee," said a huge African doctor, "for how much time horse lives?"

"We take the blood periodically, giving the horses three to four weeks to recuperate but they don't last long at all... Then their carcasses are fed to the animals at the zoo." The man's voice suddenly sounded sad. "Just now we have received a new batch of horses, especially selected for us at the studs."

Then they all turned round and spotted Panama.

"And to what do we owe this pleasure?" asked the elderly doctor who had been explaining about the serum in surprise.

"I'm Ponomariev! I'm looking for Piotr Grigorievich. I've got a letter for him."

"Let's have a look. I'm Piotr Grigorievich. Go and have a look, comrades." He took off his glasses, held the sheet of paper close to his eyes and started reading.

Just then the horses were led through the yard. They were very big and splendid-looking and Panama had never seen any like them before. They walked past, snorting and twitching their skins nervously. All of a sud-

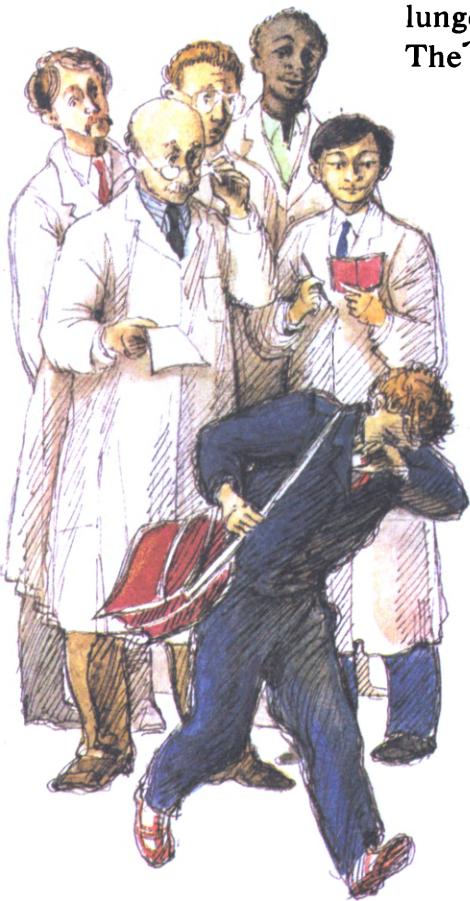
den a huge chestnut stallion lunged forward and reared.

The grooms shouted out in frightened voices and hung onto the leads like acrobats, and shaking his

head, the horse dragged them right across the yard until he was at last surrounded and led through a door, gaping open like a huge dark mouth.

"Right. I see. I'll be over as soon as I've seen to my post-graduate students," said Piotr Grigorievich. "Why, what's your name — P o n o m a - r i e v—are you crying?"

"Yes!" shrieked



Panama. "Aren't vets who treat animals supposed to be like Dr. Doolittle? But what kind of Dr. Doolittle are you! Why, you're sucking all the horses' blood like vampires! A horse gives you all it's got and then you go and feed it to the lions! You're not doctors at all! You're worse than savage animals... A wolf at least finishes off its prey in one go but you slowly suck all the juices out of them, you bloodsuckers!" He shouted, stamped his feet and waved his fists right under Piotr Grigorievich's nose. All the other vets crowded round and exchanged embarrassed glances.

"Stop yelling!" Piotr Grigorievich suddenly shouted shrilly.

And Panama immediately stopped. He sobbed and gulped down his tears.

"Nguen, come here, will you! That's right!" Piotr Grigorievich led a small Vietnamese out of the circle. "Tell us how the children in your hospital died of tetanus. Go on and tell this silly nitwit! And you, you too," he said grabbing hold of the huge African's hand, "Tell him how a whole village in your country was poisoned by some tinned food and died because you had no serum against botulism!" Piotr Grigorievich grew more and more excited, his face broke out in red blotches, and his hands shook. "He thinks he can teach me

and rate me! The nincompoop! You should learn to feel sorry for people first!"

Panama shrugged his shoulders, turned and took to his heels.

"Stop!"

But he went running on and on, without knowing where he was going.

CHAPTER SIX

**"WHY, YOU RECKON, I DON'T FEEL SORRY
FOR THEM?!"**

Panama sat in the large office lined with bookcases and drank tea while Piotr Grigorievich paced up and down, saying to him, "You can't do that sort of thing, chum! Throwing a tantrum at the drop of a pin! Of course, it's an unpleasant business but what's to be done? All in all, life's a fairly cruel affair. Why, you reckon, I don't feel sorry for them?! If you'd like to know, I dream of them at night. I can't look them in the eye..."

"Piotr Grigorievich," said Panama, "please don't talk about them or I'll start crying again."

"Now, now... I won't then. Would you like a sweet?"

"No. Thank you. I'll be off home now."

36 "Oh no, you won't, chum. I'll see you

home myself. Only let's drop by the riding-school first."

"The what?"

"The riding-school—oh, it's a fabulous place, chum. That's where you'll find the most beautiful horses in town. And, most likely, your Boris Stepanovich, too."

"But what's he doing there?"

"Why, training, of course. He's an excellent rider, you know. So, shall we be off? In his note he says that his horse needs looking over because something's wrong with it."

"Well, of course, let's go!" said Panama, getting to his feet. "We must. He was so worried, he kept dashing between the teachers' room and the classroom."

Waiting for them by the gates of the institute was a car with a blue cross and "Veterinary Service" written on its sides. It was the first time Panama had ridden in such a vehicle. They drove past several metro stops and a tall church with blue domes, turned into a yard and stopped by some plank gates marked "Staff only".

A boy of about fifteen with a red armband, signifying he was on duty, met them by the entrance. "Oh, at last, Piotr Grigorievich," he exclaimed joyfully. "You know, we're already at our wits' end."

“Is he lying down?”

Panama was amazed how hard and business-like the vet’s voice now sounded.

“His fetlocks are swollen and he can’t stand. It’s probably colic.”

“We’ll see about that. Has he got a temperature?”

“Yes, a high one.”

“Well, that’s only to be expected...”

Panama had difficulty keeping up with them as they marched across the yard which was strewn with various brightly-painted bars,

cubes, striped posts and pillars. A small donkey was wandering aimlessly about. Panama had never seen one before but he had no time to stop and stare.

They went up the ramp into the shadowy stables and walked along a corridor lined with grillcovered doors through which intelligent horses’ eyes gazed down at Panama.

At the end of the corridor some people were standing in a crowd and talking in hushed voices.



“Is he in this stall?” asked the vet. “Is he lying down?”

Above the stall's open door there was a sign saying, “Comet. Thoroughbred riding stallion. 1968”, and right at the back a large horse was sprawled on the floor in an unnatural position. Panama noticed his flanks were heaving heavily.

“Get the emergency lamp!” ordered the vet. “And set it up in the corridor.”

They all started bustling about and someone brought along a bright lamp. Panama caught sight of Boris Stepanovich, pale, his lips trembling, squatting by the horse's head and supporting it with one hand and quickly stroking its fringe and eyes with the other.

“Get him up, get him up and lead him out carefully!”

With a doleful and protracted groan, the horse heaved himself to his feet and limped out, resting heavily on his hind-legs and treading jerkily on his fore-legs as though treading on needles. He was tied up in the middle of the corridor in such a way that he could be approached from all angles.

“Easy, boy, easy, laddie. There, there, my beauty,” coaxed Boris Stepanovich, and all the others—the grooms in padded jackets, the young lad on duty, the thin old man with the

grey moustache wearing white jodhpurs and a red jacket—stroked, patted and said soothing things to the horse.

“Oh, Comet, Comet...” sighed the old man, “what a horse! Why, he’s priceless. Just look what pedigree eyes he’s got!”

Panama looked at the horse’s dark-violet eyes and as he turned his head, they suddenly became a rich transparent amber.

After standing still for a while, Comet suddenly swayed and collapsed onto the floor. His bared teeth looked like long keyboards, and his neck went limp like rubber.

“Hold him up, hold him up, lads... Borya, grab his lip and don’t let go. Come on now, Comet, my lovely lad, get up, get up, old chum, come on, you’ve got to... Get up, my darling...”

The stallion was raised to his feet again and the vet squatted down and took hold of his foot just above his shoe. The horse shuddered and started groaning.

“Well, is it colic?” Boris Stepanovich inquired anxiously.

“How could it be colic? How could it be that?” asked a groom. “I walked him for two hours yesterday. Do you reckon I don’t know my job? Why, I’ve worked in a stable since I was five.”

40 “It’s not only caused by watering a horse



after riding, its feed..." said the vet pensively. "If, say, the feed is rather on the heavy side, the horse's heart pumps all its blood down to its legs... Just look how bloated his belly is. But that's not all. He's also got some kind of infection. Well, let's give him this jab to start off with." He opened his case, brought out a shiny syringe and jingled a vial. "Twist his lip, Borya!"

Boris Stepanovich twisted the horse's upper lip with his long sinewy hand and the horse started quivering slightly.

"Easy does it!" said the vet, sharply jabbing the needle like a knife into his croup. "Right, that's it, that's it... Now we'll wait a bit, then let off some blood and relieve the swelling in his legs. And tomorrow you must give him a good massage if, that is, his temperature has gone down. Boris Stepanovich, are you going to spend the night here?"

"Yes," nodded the latter. "Of course, I'll stay here."

"Well, if anything happens in the night, give me a ring and wake me up."

"It feels as if his temperature's dropping," said a groom, feeling the horse. "Mmm?"

"Too early for that..."

Panama also felt the horse's hot dry coat.

42 When they went out into the yard it was al-

ready getting dark. Boris Stepanovich walked with them all the way to the exit.

“So, you’ll have to alter his feeding ration. Yes, Borya, you’re out of luck again: this is the third year something daft’s happened right before the competitions. First your Angus fell, then your Gotlib got that awful gash from overreaching* and now Comet...”

“Yes, I am unlucky,” replied Boris Stepanovich. “Although some luck came my way today. You came quickly.”

“That’s who you’ve got to thank!” said Piotr Grigorievich, patting Panama on the head. “Wait till you heard how he stole into the institute—ever so cunning he was... And what a talking-to he gave us! Yes, he kicked up such a fuss!”

“Thanks, Igor!” said Boris Stepanovich. “I’ve got so carried away here, I quite forgot about you. I’m sorry. You probably haven’t done your homework and you must be dying of hunger and your folks must be worried sick about you?”

“Boris Stepanovich,” said Panama, “may I come here tomorrow?”

* When ridden, and especially at a fast pace, some horses strike the backs of their feet with their hooves. This is called “overreaching”. Horses which overreach badly cannot take part in competitions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“PANAMA’S STILL GOT SOMEONE TO DEFEND HIM!”

Next to the Young Pioneers’ meeting room was a small closet where the drums, bugles, detachment flags and other useful things described by the incomprehensible and grand term of “Young Pioneer paraphernalia” were kept.

Masha Ugolkova had been asked to mend the detachment flags whose numbers and letters had come off. It was cosy in the closet smelling of paint, and the cups and school prizes shone brilliantly behind glass cases. Masha worked quickly and her thoughts flowed smoothly as if of their own accord. She recalled a television programme she had watched the evening before and simultaneously imagined her father and herself at the theatre the following Sunday.

“...Ponomarev,” she suddenly heard this familiar surname, and glancing round the gap in the door, saw the Young Pioneer leader and Vasya Moslov seated at the table in the next room.

“Well, just make him more active!” said the girl. “I’m sorry, Vasya, but somehow I find it hard to believe that Ponomarev’s as
44 dreadful as you make out...”

"Honest he is! He draws caricatures and skips lessons..."

"But have you had any heart-to-heart talks with him?"

"You've got to be joking! Why, he doesn't even want to talk to me! I reckon we should discuss his behaviour at our next committee meeting."

"That's a bit extreme, isn't it? No, Vasya, first you've got to at least talk to the fellow. And better still, you know what—give him a job of some sort to do..."

"Oh, he'd bungle anything!"

"And then we'll see what's what. Has he any friends? May be you could get through to him with the help of his friends?"

"He's friends with Stolbov but he's hopeless too... I reckon we should do it this way: give him a job, and if he refuses to do it or makes a mess of it, we should discuss him at the next meeting. And let Stolbov who knows him better than anyone lead this discussion! And then if Ponomarev still refuses to pull his socks up, we should go as far as expelling him from the Young Pioneers."

"Goodness!" exclaimed the girl. "I don't think it'll come to that. But aren't you scared of splitting the class in two, Vasya?"

"How do you mean?"

"What I say. What if some of the class supports you and the rest—Ponomarev? A feud'll break out in the class."

"Oh, who's going to stick up for Ponomarev? He hasn't any friends besides Stolbov. And he doesn't count. So that won't happen..."

Masha listened with clenched fists and thought to herself, "Oh, no, that Vasya's not an ass among asses—he's far worse than that.

This is his way of getting his own back on Panama for the caricature. But it was Stolbov who drew it. So, not only does Vasya lack a sense of humour, he also wants to destroy an innocent person." She felt like marching out and telling all but stopped herself

in time. First of all, because they would say she had been eavesdropping and, secondly, because Boris Stepanovich had already explained that Panama would not write a letter to himself. So if Moslov had not believed him, why should he believe her now? Masha recalled Panama's downcast face, narrow stooping shoulders and hunched back and how he used to sit in lessons with



his head propped on his hand, and his thoughts far-far away. When he was called to, he used to come to his senses but hear nothing and only blink his blue eyes. And all of a sudden Masha felt sorry for him. Why, he had nobody to stick up for him! No, he did have someone!

Straight after school she dashed over to the stadium to her friend, Yulia Fomina, who was speeding across the ice, flushed and perspiring, and practising complicated dance steps. The music kept whining, wailing and buzzing and the tape kept stopping.

"What on earth's going on!" yelled Yulia indignantly. "Mikhail Alexandrovich, do tell them! I just can't work like this! They've put some idiot at the controls..."

Her coach went off to sort things out and Yulia angrily skated to the barrier and asked Masha why she had come.

"Oh, Yulia!" Masha exclaimed and told her all.

"Right, everything's fine now," said Yulia's coach skating up to them. "Let's start from the very beginning. Excuse us, we've no time to spare."

"I understand," said Masha. "Yulia, what are we going to do now?"



“We’ll talk about it later!” said Yulia, waving her arms dismissively. “Anyway, what’s it got to do with you?”

Masha stood for a while and watched Yulia gliding gracefully across the mirrow-like ice and then quietly turned and set off home. “It’s just because she’s so busy. She’s really very kind,” she thought, trying to pacify herself but she felt this was in fact not quite so. You see, Yulia thought of nothing but skating, whether she was in the classroom or at a training session, it made no difference...

“Well, never mind!” thought Masha. “Panama’s still got someone to defend him! That someone is me!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

EVERY DAY EXCEPT THURSDAY

“Many words with the passing of time lose their initial meaning. Take, for instance, the Russian word for repairs—‘remont’. Originally this was a French word meaning ‘to mount a fresh horse’. And the verb to repair ‘remontirovat’ used to mean ‘to fit oneself out with new horses’, in other words, to buy new ones. Right, we’ll wash his hooves and then call it a day. Fetch me some water, will you!”

Panama dragged a bucket over to Boris Stepanovich. After being rubbed with a straw plait, Comet was contentedly munching hay. He was getting better and that day Boris Stepanovich had taken him out for a short ride.

Oh, what a hard time he and Panama had had that month! Comet had alternately got better and worse. Goodness knows how he had caught some kind of cold. They had suffered many trials and tribulations before they heard Piotr Grigorievich say, "Tomorrow you can start exercising him. First get him to walk for about half an hour and then do ten minutes at a trot..."

Panama now went to the riding-school every day. And oddly enough, now that he had all his time cut out, he stopped being late for school and even started getting better marks. He had only been given two low ones during the whole month.

Whereas before it had sometimes taken him up to five hours to do his homework—writing, dawdling on his blotting pad and gazing out the window, he no longer had time to daydream. Now he could spend no more than one and a half hours or so on his homework or else he would be late for the evening ride at the riding-school. That's why he now sat still during lessons and listened to every 49

word for if he got everything straight in the lesson, he did not have to learn it at home.

The only sad thing was that he had fallen out with Stolbov whom he had sat next to ever since the first form. No matter how many times they had been split up for chattering, they had always got back together again but this time Stolbov had moved away of his own accord and, what's more, after thumping Panama on the head.

"I know, I know, my dear old Panama," he had said on parting, "why it is you've become such a goodie-goodie and keep trying to get to the top of the form: you want to impress your lovely friend Yulia. Only you're flogging a dead horse! You're knee high to a grasshopper while she's a whopping great giant."

Well, what could Panama say? That he was working well at school without even trying? Who would believe that? And he could not very well tell him about the riding-school and, anyway, what was there to tell? How he dragged wheelbarrow-loads of manure out of the stall, put compresses on Comet and gave him enemas?

And he could not say that he did not want to impress Yulia for there wasn't a single boy
50 . in the class who did not want to win her af-

fection. Even Sapogov, who had stayed behind a year, used to fall silent when she came into the classroom. She was so beautiful and she had such a lovely red sweater and she had even been on the television and the commentator had said, "This young girl is the pride and joy of our town, a young star in the making," and other such laudatory words.

Of course, Panama liked her very much. She always had such a light and cheerful manner. When she stood up to answer questions, you could tell she did not really know the answer but she used to open her huge eyes wide and start talking on and on and before you knew it, she had earned herself a high mark... And Panama just scratched his head in surprise.

"Personal charm," Stolbov used to say. "Why, there's nothing like it! If you've charm, you can do what you like but if you haven't, you just have to slave away! Charm's just like a lazer—you can't escape from it. Take, for instance, a lazer rifle..."

Boris Stepanovich was the only one who for some reason did not fall a prey to her charm. When he called her out the first time and Yulia sauntered up to the blackboard in her unusually attractive and graceful manner, the teacher stared at her attentively and

then said cheerfully, "Well then, Yulia, tell the world what we mean by folk art, that is, the oral tradition in folk art, of course. What we think of it and why."

"It is called oral folk art," she began energetically and then gushed forth, "folk art is called folk art because it was created by the people and that's why it is popular..."

Boris Stepanovich propped his cheek against his long palm and gazed unflinchingly at Yulia until she got tongue-tied, and then asked in surprise, "Is that all? That's pity. In such a manner you could spend hours answering any question you haven't the faintest idea about. Of course, for such an answer you will receive minimum credit."

"Four out of ten?" joyfully cried Sapogov.

"A familiar mark for you, is it, Sapogov?" asked the teacher, writing a large juicy "four" in Yulia's report book.

Yulia went as red as her sweater and slammed her desk lid down irritably.

"Incidentally, you really should sit down quietly so you don't damage your teacher's and respected fellow-pupils' nervous systems. And now Ponomarev will tell us what we mean by folklore."

And Panama answered and earned himself
52 eight out of ten, although he wished he could

have vanished into thin air instead. True, ever since Yulia had sat as quietly as a mouse in literature lessons and she used to stare at Boris Stepanovich when he was speaking as if he was an oracle.

There had been an uproar that day. In the long break everyone stayed back in the classroom to attend an emergency meeting. The detachment's council chairman, Vasya Moslov, said, "A broadsheet contest is being held in the school. We've got to take part."

"What?" laughed Stolbov. "So far this year we haven't put out a single³ broadsheet..."

"Well, so what? A group will stay behind today and put out several at once. And some of us will help them. Take, Ponomarev, for instance."

"I can't today."

"Tomorrow then."

"I can't tomorrow," replied Panama. "I'm busy."

"Well, when will you be free?" asked Vasya spitefully.

"On Thursday."

Then they all started shouting, "Ponomarev's showing off. He wants to look special!"

"You know, you're really going too far," said Vasya. "I reckon you ought to be rated. You skipped a meeting and didn't show up for 53

the hike... Have you any valid excuses?"

"Yes," replied Panama.

"Well, then explain them to us. Now, Yulia does have valid reasons, and we try to keep her as free as possible. We make allowances for her."

"I can't explain. But I have my reasons," replied Panama firmly.

They all started shouting at him again. All of a sudden Masha Ugolkova stood up and said, "What are you getting at him for? I'll stay behind instead of him."

They all at once fell silent.

"Ponomarev," she continued, "isn't the sort of person to lie."

"Ha!" laughed Stolbov.

"Oh, be quiet, you fool! If Igor says he's got his reasons, it means he has. And if anyone should be rated, it's you, Vasya! To take part in this contest after not putting out a single broadsheet in two months is just a farcel!"

Then they all started making a fearful din again. Panama looked at Masha as if he was seeing her for the first time.

He thought about the incident all day and was still thinking about it when he helped Boris Stepanovich wash his horse's hooves.

"You know," he said, "Masha Ugolkova
54 really is a good person."

“Oh yes?” said Boris Stepanovich with a grin. “What made you suddenly say that?”

“What she did.”

“Well, in that case, you must be right.”

“What do you think?”

“I think Masha’s very decent, kind-hearted and sensible. And that’s why she’s beautiful...”

“Oh yes!” laughed Panama. “But she’s got a freckled nose!”

“But it suits her!” replied the teacher, wringing out the rag. “Do you really think only Yulia’s beautiful? She’s striking—you can’t argue that but she’s going to have to take a lot of stick before she comes into her own.”

That night Panama lay awake a long time thinking over what Boris Stepanovich had said. He even got up to look in the dictionary. He opened the enormous tome and read, “to strike: arrest attention of, occur to mind of, produce mental impression on” and still understood nothing.

CHAPTER NINE

A HARD COURSE

Comet was now back to normal. He used to neigh happily and stamp his feet whenever Panama or Boris Stepanovich came into his 55

stall, and playfully grab their jackets between his teeth when they tightened his girth or put the high leather shields on his slender springy legs to ensure he did not bang his tendons with his hooves and injure himself.

And then rippling his muscles, he would stride briskly out into the riding-school. Boris Stepanovich would hoist his foot into the stirrup and be up the saddle in a flash. Then Panama would climb up to the judges' box and watch in delight as the handsome horse pranced round the ring, kicking up sand.

As Panama watched the tall and very slender muscular dark bay smoothly passing by, snorting, his muscles rippling under his satin coat, he used to imagine himself sitting high up in the saddle and the stallion striding out lithely beneath him.

One day some boys came into the riding-school leading different-coloured horses. The woman instructor said something to them and they slipped onto their mounts. Then Panama at once noticed the difference between their riding and Boris Stepanovich's.

His teacher sat in the saddle as though it was the most comfortable position for him to be in, his back flexible and his hands as supple as a pianist's responding to the horse's every movement.



The boys huffed and puffed, and their bottoms kept thudding heavily against the saddles. Their horses walked sideways and sometimes stopped completely. One shaggy pony suddenly leapt into the middle of the ring and started bucking and the boy bumped about in the saddle like a sack of potatoes.

"Sit still! Sit still!" shouted the woman instructor.

The boy held on with all his might and then slid slowly and heavily down onto the sand.

But Panama still envied them! Why, he would never be able to sit like that in a saddle, or lean back or kick the horse in the ribs with his heels.

"Well, do you like it, chum?" asked Boris Stepanovich, riding up. "Would like to ride like that?"

"Yes!"

"Right then... I've been waiting for you to ask me but I must say, young man, your modesty has surpassed my expectations. I decided that at the very most you dreamed of becoming a stableboy."

"I'll never be able to ride like that," said Panama sadly.

"We'll see about that," replied his teacher, urging his horse straight into a canter.

58 The following Friday Panama put on a

white shirt and a new suit and they set off for the instructors' rooms where the old man with the grey moustache whom Panama had seen on his first visit, was sitting in a room to himself.

Panama already knew a great deal about him. He knew, for instance, that Denis Platonovich, as he was called, was perhaps the oldest and most experienced jockey in the whole of the Soviet Union, and that even before the 1917 Revolution he was famous abroad and had brought home prizes which were reverentially described in equestrian handbooks. He also knew that he had lost four sons during the Second World War, that ranks and titles meant absolutely nothing to him, and that once he had thrashed a prince with a riding crop for breaking a horse's leg (it happened during his stay in England where he had worked as trainer for several years). He also knew that when the old man was given an award for his many years of work, he had begun his speech of thanks by saying, "I have devoted my life to the good of horses.."

Panama's brow was already perspiring with excitement as he walked towards the instructors' rooms.

"May we come in, Denis Platonovich," asked Boris Stepanovich.

"Please do..." boomed a voice from the other side of the door. "Oh, Borya, hello, my dear chap!" The old man did not seem to even notice Panama.

The walls of the tiny room were hung all over with photographs, rosettes and ribbons and two silver wreaths. There were statuettes of horses with inscriptions on the cupboard, the table and the window-sill.

"I've seen your Comet out riding. You shouldn't be making him trot so much. Get on and jump more..."

"That's not why I'm here today," said Boris Stepanovich. "You remember how fifteen years ago a boy was brought to you who used to come and watch the horses every day?"

"I haven't started falling out of the saddle yet: my memory's still intact," laughed the old man, glancing in the



mirror and smoothing his grey curls.

“Well, today that same boy has brought you his pupil. Denis Platonovich, I have an inkling he’s going to ride well.”

The old man grew serious. “Well, you know, I don’t train much these days. Did you hear what they said about me at the meeting? ‘The old gaffer’s teaching methods are barbaric.’ Things are different these days—now all you see is kindness everywhere. But what I want to know is—are we training fashion models or horsemen? Equestrianism is a sport, after all! But they reckon we should wipe their saddles with a lace hankie after every jump!”

“That’s precisely why I’ve brought him to you,” put in Boris Stepanovich. “Because I want him to become a real horseman.”



The old man kept silent for a moment and his eyes sparkled.

"Right!" he barked and wiped his moustache. "Come here, boy. Yes, you don't look stupid! Are your parents tall?"

"Five foot eight and a half and five foot three," Panama quickly replied.

"Get undressed, boy."

Panama nervously unbuttoned his shirt and trousers.

"Right," said the old man, stretching his hideous two-fingered hand towards him (rumour had it that a horse had bitten off three of his fingers in his young days). He expertly felt Panama's elbows and knees with his hands. "Have you ever broken an arm or leg? Never bumped your head hard?"

"No..."

"Right. Don't breathe." The old man bent down and pressed his ear flat against Panama's chest. "Do you often get sore throats?"

"No."

The old man got a dynamometer out of the table drawer, handed it to Panama and said, "Squeeze it. Right." He glanced at the number, twitched his moustache and carelessly flung the dynamometer back into the drawer. "Walk away and kick your leg up as high as
62 you can! One! Two!.. Well, Borya, this young

man is built alright but his bones are weak, his joints need greasing and his muscles are in poor shape.”

“But he’s got what really matters most,” said Boris Stepanovich. “A soul.”

“Well, as long as it doesn’t part with his body during the initial training sessions, then may be something will come of him. For, as the Romans used to say, ‘Spiritual strength makes up for many things.’ Now, listen to me, boy. Take all your papers to the secretary. We’ll start training on a regular basis on Monday, no, I’m superstitious, Tuesday. The first month, you’ll ride twice a week, the second, three times, and the third every day, except Thursday, that is, of course, if you stick it out that long. I warn you, you’ve been taken on out of respect for your teacher. That’s the only privilege you’ll get and I don’t expect to hear another word from you about your teacher. He’s one thing and you’re something entirely different. Neither illness nor other engagements are valid excuses for missing lessons. And there’s one other thing I’ll warn you about: in the autumn I pick one hundred boys and by the spring I’m left with five, and this does not mean that the ones left will necessarily become real horsemen... I won’t keep you any longer...”

CHAPTER TEN

"MASHA, YOU'RE OFF YOUR ROCKER!"

What a wonderful smell of cabbage soup was coming from the school kitchen! And when the cook, Galina Vassilievna, was making pancakes, you could smell them even from the classroom here. And the children would be sniffing excitedly long before the second break when the whole school rushed into the canteen.

The little first-formers dreamed of how they would lick the cranberry jam off the pancakes, and at the mere mention of a plate of thick cabbage soup the big tenth-formers' stomachs would start rumbling.

That's the way we're made, you see: three hours after breakfast we already feel hungry again.

Masha Ugolkova shut her eyes tight and tried not to think about the crusty buns, and white milk gushing into a glass from a paper carton. Then she started working out in her head how much money she had in the handkerchief hidden in a corner of her satchel.

"Maria Alexandrovna," she said, going up to her teacher in the break, "I can't go to the theatre."

64 "What, Masha? Why, it's such a wonder-

ful play... And, you know, the class has only been given five tickets."

"I just can't," said Masha, blushing so deeply that tears sprang to her eyes.

"Oh well," sighed the teacher. "Valya Solovyeva, would you like to go to the theatre?"

"Oh, of course!" Valya ran up to the table. She was the tallest and merriest girl in the class. "I adore the theatre. I just adore it!"

"Well then, here's a ticket. You can bring Masha the money tomorrow. But I'm warning you, if you start giggling again so loudly that the actors can't be heard, I won't ever take you to the theatre again."

On her way home Masha tried not to look at the trays of pies on sale but she could not help hearing the saleswoman's cries of, "Hot pies with meat, rice and jam!"

"Masha, Masha!" Yulia ran up to Masha. "It's you I'm calling to! Look!" she said and showed her a new fifty-kopeck piece. "Let's go to the ice-cream parlour!"

"I can't," said Masha although the mere thought of an ice-cream made her mouth water sweetly.

"Why, haven't you any money?" asked Yulia, staring keenly at her.

"No," replied Masha, looking down.

"You're fibbing. Why? You know, I saw 65

you counting money in the break. You must have about ten roubles stashed away in your handkerchief!"

"It's not mine... It doesn't belong to me," said Masha, "I can't spend it... I just can't!"

"Whose is it, then?"

"I can't tell you. Don't be angry with me! I can't..."

"Masha, you're off your rocker!" said Yulia. "You're as thin as a rake as it is, and you've even stopped going to the canteen. I don't miss a trick, you know."

"Yulia, I know what I'm doing! I'll explain everything later!" And she ran off home.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"TROT!"

Panama was lying in bed. Even his eyelids seemed to be aching with fatigue. Through what seemed like a wad of cottonwool he heard his mother say to his father, "Just look at him! Why, he's completely crippled. The child hardly got home. Well, feeding horses—that's not so bad, especially as it's even helping him with his school-work. But you should have just seen how he came home today! He couldn't sit down. And not only do we have this dreadful stench in the flat now

but the child's maiming himself as well! Why are you keeping silent?"

"I'm not," replied Panama's father. "I'm just letting you have your say."

"Please don't be funny! I don't feel in the least like laughing. Have you seen what he's got on his hand?"

"What's he got on his hand?"

"Why, a weal mark as thick as his finger! I asked him where he'd got it from and he said, 'I got hit with the whip to stop me grabbing hold of the saddle.' It appears it's a whip on a supple handle. I ask you! You call that a riding-school? Just look, his legs are all covered in bruises. He says that they're from rubbing against the saddle. Oh, do say something! You're his father, after all!"

"Listen, old man!" said Panama's father, bending over him. "Maybe Mum's right? Why don't you give it all up! A fine thing to go in for—horses... Now, a radio or aircraft modelling club, or even a motorcycle—I could understand that! But horses are old hat! I mean, who rides horses these days? Only odd bods."

Panama opened his eyes and said slowly, "Dad, if you say anything else like that, I won't respect you any more."

His father staggered back and started 67

pacing furiously up and down the room, clutching his head and shouting, "What the hell is all this about! All this talk about horses! Why, you'll break your neck! Can't you understand you're lying here now as if you've been flogged nearly to death. But what's it all in aid of? What'll you get for all your sufferings? You can hardly walk and you smell like a manure heap! What's in it for you?"

"The root of learning is bitter but its fruit is sweet!" replied Panama, quoting Denis Platonovich's favourite saying.

"Sweet! What's sweet? Why, you look terrible!"

"Mum and Dad!" said Panama. "Today I went round half the ring at a gallop before I grabbed hold of the saddle. Why, that's really something! It's made me so happy!"

"He's mad!" said his father. "He's mad. You won't be able to go to school tomorrow, you know."

"No, I'll probably be alright," said Panama diffidently. "I'll rest up a while and then get up..."

"What are you talking to him for! Just forbid him to ride, that's all!" said Panama's mother. "After all, you're his father!"

"And I try to be a good one too!" objected
68 his father. "I don't want my only son to bear

me a grudge all his life for having banned him for riding. If you want to know, I rode a few times as a boy too. And there's nothing dreadful about it."

"What saddle did you use?" asked Panama.

"Oh, without a saddle! We just used some sort of padded jacket."

"Oh!" said Panama. "You can't call that riding..."

"Well, we'll see how you ride," replied his father in a slightly offended tone.

"In six month's time I'll do the advanced test, that is, if I stick it out that long, of course."

"What are you talking to him about, will you tell me!" snapped his mother. "Are you banning him or not?"

"Oh, I'm so tired. Can't you row in the kitchen?"

"He's right," said Panama's father. "Let's go into the kitchen. But you know what?" he said, going out. "I reckon these riding lessons are making the boy fantastically tough. I can see it when he gets up in the morning. Why, he's as fit as a fiddle. And he never was before..."

Panama could not hear how his mother countered that. Dozing off, he recalled his first riding lesson.

...In the locker-room Denis Platonovich held a roll-call: "Vasilchuk? No. Excellent. We'll cross his name out. Broitman? No. Excellent. Better now than later. Kovalievsky?.. Now let's allocate the horses: Oleksin, you can have Format, Vatrushkin—Rombik, Ponomariev, as you're here for the first time, we'll give you the Roman Emperor, Nero, the persecutor of Christians and boys aspiring to be horsemen. One small warning: saddle him carefully—although he's a gelding, he's bad-tempered and kicks with his forelegs and hind-legs. So, if you spend too long over the snaffle, you may get your fingers nipped. Put the snaffle on carefully and only put your fingers in the part of his mouth where he has no teeth. Spitsin, go through the saddling procedure for us!"

"You walk up to the horse on the near side. If he's standing awkwardly, you say, 'Stand straight!' and put on the halter. Then you groom him with a brush..."

"That'll do! Bichun, name all the parts of the bridle."

The small spry boy started energetically, "Two cheek straps, one brow band, one chin strap, reins. Snaffle, rings..."

"How do you carry the bridle?"

"My, they know so much," marvelled Pa-

nama. Although Boris Stepanovich had already explained it all to him, he could remember absolutely nothing. What a good thing the old man was not asking him anything or he would make a complete fool of himself.

And then he dragged the bridle and saddle along in his left arm, as he had been taught. It was a huge army saddle with girths trailing down to the ground and not a neat racing one. He kept tripping over the girths and nearly fell and when he tried to pick them up, a heavy stirrup banged him painfully against his leg. At last he got to the stall marked "Nero, gelding, Orlov trotter. 1962."

He walked in warily and the gelding glared at him from a corner.

"Easy, boy, easy, it's me, me," he said cautiously and tried to walk towards his near side. But Nero swung round sharply and stood with his back to Panama, "Oh, now he's going to kick me!" he thought and his heart sank.

"Who's left the stall open?" the instructor called out. "You want to let the horses out for a little stroll?"

Panama hastily shut the door, dropped the saddle and bridle and found himself face-to-face with the gelding who was now glowering over his shoulder at him. No, this wasn't sweet-natured, easy-going Comet who was

so lovely to be with: this was a bad-tempered vicious brute capable of anything. Panama backed into a corner.

"Hey, greenhorn! What's your name, Ponomariiev, isn't it? Open up!"

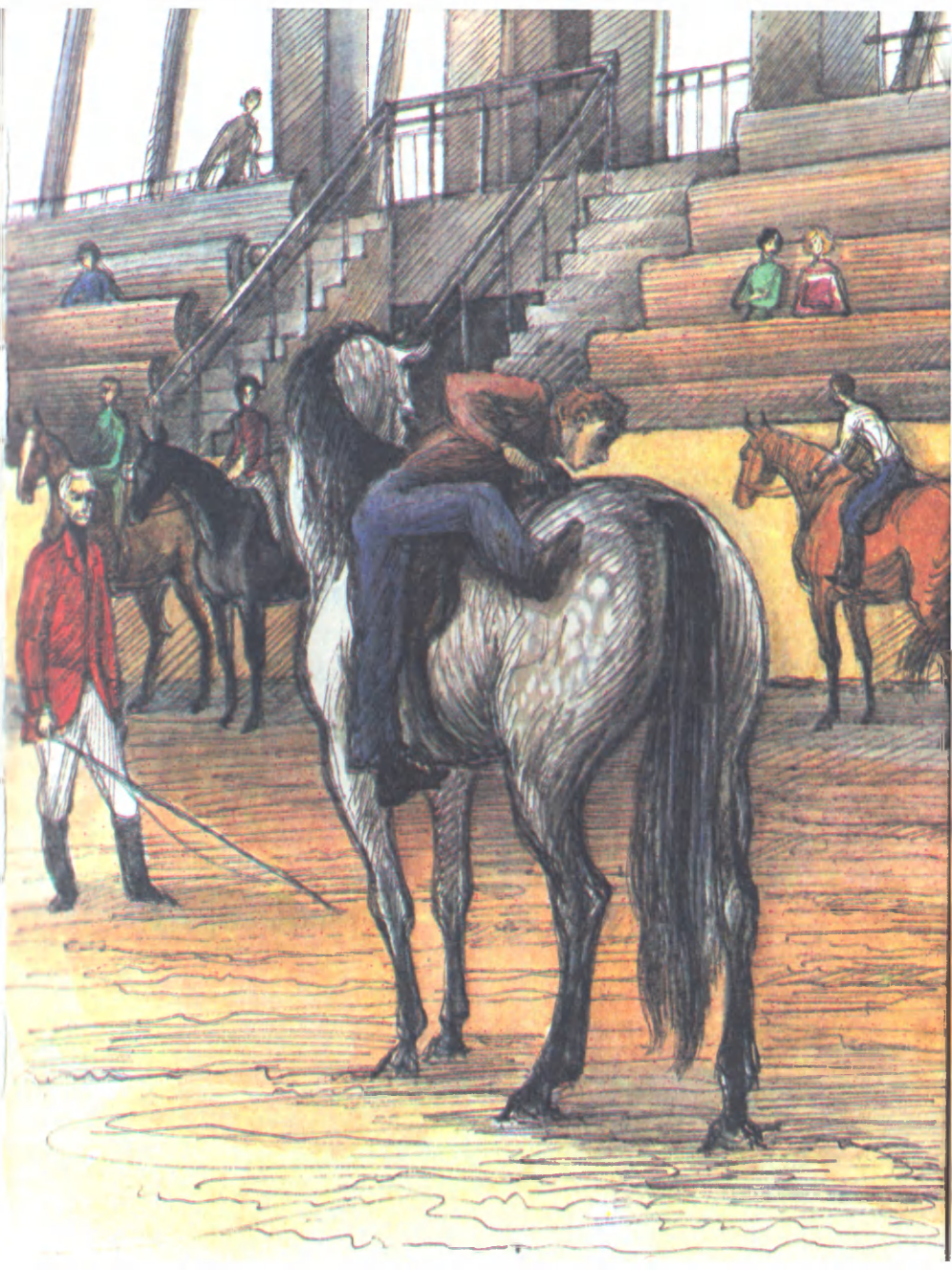
Panama glanced round and spotted curly-haired Bichun on the other side of the door.

"Pinned you, has he? I'll show you, you swine!" he said, waving his arms at the gelding who flattened his ears at once. "Stand straight, will you! Straight! Just watch how you bridle him. See? You get a good grip on his head with your hand. Hold your elbow like that or else he'll nip you. See? Now he's got it on my elbow, has he, the rogue! Now watch how you put the saddle on... Oh, the instructor's coming! I'll go or he'll tell me off. Don't be scared of him, Nero, I mean. He's scared himself and that's why he kicks."

"Well, how are we doing?" asked Denis Platonovich, coming into the stall. "Right, you've put on his bridle so you're half-way there. Now for his saddle. Go on, put it on! That's right. Tighten the girth. Not like that, not like that... Not the way a woman does it! Right. Now lead him out."

"I'll never learn to saddle a horse," thought Panama, walking into the riding-school ring.

72 "Align! Attention! Mount!"



But being small, the stirrup was on about the same level as Panama's eyes. He lifted up his leg as high as it would go and nearly toppled over.

"Let down the strap!" Bichun whispered to him.

Goodness knows what strap he meant! Oh, yes! He guessed he meant the stirrup strap. Right, he clambered up into the saddle. My, how high up he was!

"I'm sitting in a saddle!" he thought, thrilled to bits. "Why, wasn't Bichun kind helping me!"

"Everyone walk!" called the instructor, making an ear-splitting cracking sound with something.

"Look!" said someone behind. "He's got his whip. We'll have to watch out now, lads."

For some reason or other Nero stood stock-still and refused to budge, no matter how hard Panama tugged on the reins.

"Squeeze with your knees to move forward!" shouted the instructor, flicking the end of his lash over the horse and Panama's shin.

Nero lunged forward at a trot. "Lord, how bumpy it is! I feel as if something's going to snap in my stomach any moment now. Oh, why do! Keep sliding sideways!"

74 "Sit straight!" called the instructor again,

flicking the end of the lash across Panama's back. Panama cringed and stopped sliding. So that was it—you had to sit up straight!..

"Drop your stirrups! Trot!"

"Whoever thought horse riding was fun. Why, it's absolute agony! Oh, help!.. Oh, I'm sliding to the left... no, to the right..."

Half an hour later perspiration was pouring off Panama and he thought the lesson was never going to end. And just then the instructor called out, "Canter! Canter!"

What was happening? How gently, smoothly and fast the horses were now speeding along!

"I'm riding, I'm riding..." thought Panama, happy again. Then quite suddenly he took fright and without thinking frantically grabbed hold of the saddle with one hand and at once felt a searing pain on his hand.

"No help!" cried the old man.

Tears welled out of Panama's eyes.

"Jump down! Do thirty knee-bends!"

But his legs would not bend at all and his back was aching terribly!

"Never mind, never mind," said Bichun when they were washing in the shower. "You haven't rubbed anything sore. I had such a bad sore after my first lesson that I thought my leg was going to drop off. Just bear the

pain, you've got to if you want to learn to ride properly. Don't worry, things will turn out all right in the end."

"But why does he keep letting rip with that lunging whip?" asked Panama, examining his weal mark.

"You call that letting rip?! He was just showing you your mistake! Letting rip! Why, if you really let rip with that whip, you could split someone in two."

"Couldn't he just tell me!"

"That'd take far too long and you'd have been thrown goodness knows how many times out of the saddle before he made you understand. Anyway, don't pay any attention to the pain. During a race in France once a stone flew up from under a horse's hooves and knocked a jockey's eye out but he still kept going and finished the race. You know, if he'd fallen off, he might not have lived to tell the tale but instead he came in second and was awarded an Order of the Legion of Honour."

"What good is an order to me..."

"Or something even worse could happen. For instance, you could maim your horse in your fright! You've got to learn to keep a cool head... Well, we'll see if you come to the second lesson or not," he said on parting with an ironic grin.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE ROOT OF LEARNING

However, Panama did come to the second lesson and to the fifth and twelfth one as well. Gritting his teeth and overcoming his pain, he used to do exercises in the morning—touching his toes fifty times and bending his knees another fifty times. He ran to and from school without his coat which was like doing a two hundred metre sprint. After two hours of homework, he would jump onto the trolleybus and go through all the agony again:

“Undo your stirrups! Let go of the rein! Trot on!” A crack of the whip and a piercing shout: “Where’re your elbows? Tuck them in! You, on Nero, your knees are wobbling!” And the end of the lunging whip would crack across his leg. “You, on Format, sit up straight! You’re all bent over! Ponomariev, look ahead! Look at the hooves of the mount in front! Why are you looking so glum? Keep your heels down! Down, I said!” And again the whip cracked.

It did not hurt much but it was terribly degrading. And it was so hard to sit properly with your stirrups unfastened and nothing to support yourself on. Panama gripped the horse’s firm flanks with his knees. The lower 77

part of his leg from his knee down to his ankle had to move freely because for the most part it was with your legs that you guided the horse and gave him commands. Panama gripped so hard that his back became damp with perspiration. Riding along behind, biting his lip, came Bichun on Format.

Bichun was small and Format was enormous and the boy's legs stuck out as if he was doing the splits.

Of the twenty boys who had come to the first lesson, Bichun and Panama were now the only ones left. Some had had problems at school, others had tired of counting their bruises and others still had been told by Denis Platonovich in a sarcastic tone, "It's not the horse you're fond of, my young cavalier, but it's yourself on the horse so it seems, riding just is not for you! Go and buy yourself a motorbike instead!"

The days flew by and it grew noticeably colder. When they left the ring after lessons, steam rose up from the horses' sweaty croups. The horses panted heavily and their skins twitched, and the boys staggered alongside them, their knees wobbling.

And it was the same day in day out: "Lie flat on the horse's back! Swing your legs!

By now Panama knew all the horses. There was bad-tempered, nervous Nero who, it seemed, was just waiting for an opportunity to bite or kick you. His favourite nasty trick was to squeeze your side against a wall as you were riding along fast and when you cringed with pain and grabbed your knee, he would drop you at once and start whinnying cheekily, just as though he was laughing.

Huge, elephantine Format would plod heavily along and nothing could make him break into a canter. After a session Panama used to feel that Format had been riding him and not the other way round.

Rombik was blind in his right eye and he was very easily frightened. A crack of the whip would send him shying to the left for he was scared there was something dangerous on his blind side.

Once a fortnight on Quarantine Panama used to give his guts "a nice shake-up", as Denis Platonovich used to call it. Formerly, Quarantine had been quite a decent trotter but the only vestiges of his glorious sporting past were his irrepressible desire to come first and his incredibly powerful trot which made his rider's eyes nearly pop out of their sockets. Riding him was like riding a runaway train.

“Boris Stepanovich has Comet—that’s quite different,” Panama once said dreamily to Bichun as they were returning from a lesson.

The senior riders used to train in a part of the ring where you couldn’t come on the riding-school’s ordinary horses. The beautiful thoroughbreds moved gracefully along on their slender legs, snorting, and with subtle gestures their riders made them carry out the most complex commands of top-class jumping. Their sleek bay bodies soared smoothly and effortlessly over the fences. This was wonderful and inaccessible world apart.

“It’s not their fault they’re like that,” replied Bichun. “We must love them the way they are. That’s what I reckon.”

“Ha! Love them! Vermouth crushed me so hard with his croup in the stall, I thought I was going to die,” recalled Panama. “And I’m supposed to love him!”

“But do you know that Denis Platonovich unharnessed Vermouth from a cart in the street. The drayman was beating him about the head with a log. So now he’s getting his own back on people. It’s all people’s fault.”

“It’s a pity different people ride the horses every day. They don’t have time to get used to their riders. Everyone should be allotted

"You can't do that," said Bichun. "If you get used to one, you won't be able to ride others. We're not good enough for that yet. Mind you, of course, it would be nice to have your own horse. He'd be like a friend. Have you got a friend?"

"I did have," said Panama, "but we fell out. You see, I'm busy with my riding-lessons all the time... His name's Stolbov."

"Yes," replied Bichun pensively. "It's hard for us to have friends... But what's best of all is to be friends with a nice girl."

"Oh, bother them!" said Panama.

"Of course, it depends on the girl," said Bichun. "I mean someone pleasant who you can be friends with all your life."

"You can be friends with a boy all your life. In fact, that's even better."

"But it's more interesting with a girl. A boy's just the same as you but girls are quite different. Girls, why, they're funny... But is there girl you like?"

"Nope."

"What's your life like then?" asked Bichun, stopping in surprise. "It must be ever so dull. Well, I have. Only she lives in another town. I visited Granny there in the holidays."

"Who is she?"

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what’s she like?”

“Nice!” replied Bichun resolutely. “And you know, the boys there who told me she corresponded with another boy were just lying because they’re jealous she’s friends with me. Well, I’m going on the Underground. Cheerio!” And he held out his rough hand.

Panama walked the two bus-stops on foot, thinking all the way. It was drizzling and the trolleybuses’ tyres hissed over the asphalt. He thought about Yulia Fomina.

How wonderful it would be to turn up at school on a horse, of course, dressed in all the right gear—red jacket, white jodhpurs, high boots and a dress-shirt. And best of all on a black horse with white girths. Simple and smart-looking. Then she would at last see who Ponomariev really was. He would canter slowly round the playground, raise the horse on its hind-legs and leap over the hedge.

“Then she’d understand,” sighed Panama. “But she doesn’t even notice me now.”

He had not told a soul that he was learning to ride and he had plenty of reasons. Well, firstly, because it was not only his secret but Boris Stepanovich’s as well and he had not told anyone... And, secondly, because Pana-

ma wanted to give them all a surprise by coming into the classroom one day and announcing casually, "It's the national equestrian championships tomorrow. Anyone who wants to cheer me on can come. I'll leave the tickets at the entrance."

How they would all gasp! They were always calling him "Panama", well, now he'd shown them what an old hat he really was!

"Only when will that be?" he asked himself, coming down to earth with a bump. "We're still only walking and trotting and we haven't even started jumping fences yet. Other groups started jumping ages ago but all Denis Platonovich does is shout, 'Spaghetti legs! Back, heels, chin, elbows...' And 'Why's your backside sticking out like a bubble? Tuck it under!' and he's for ever using the lunging whip too."

Panama sighed, "I wish I had someone to talk to. Bichun feels miserable, too. Oh, I wish I had Stolbov... At least he's a friend." However, Stolbov was unlikely to understand Panama because he was too full of himself.

But as Denis Platonovich keeps saying: "A true horseman always puts his horse before himself. If you don't feel your horse, you'll never learn to ride. And you can feel him, only if you really think about him."

How he'd booted Spitsin out! When Spitsin's horse had stopped in the corridor, everybody had started yelling at him, and he had given it a mighty kick. Then Denis Platonovich had come up and said ever so quietly to him, "Get out of the school."

"You must understand," their instructor used to say, "a horse is weaker than a man! For a person 220 volts is dangerous, for a horse 18 volts is fatal. You hear people say 'he's as strong as a horse' but, you know, to poison a horse, you need five times less poison than you do for a man! You can maim a horse with your bare hands. If you turn his head sharply towards his croup, you may easily dislocate his shoulder. The defect can't be cured, it means he'll be lame for the rest of his life."

By now Panama knew all sorts of things about horses. It wasn't for nothing they had theory classes once a week. For two hours he used to sit in class with his mouth open, listening to amazing stories about horses and riders. Denis Platonovich was a born storyteller. Panama was thrilled by what he heard but he had nobody to share it with. He would have told Yulia everything. And she would have understood all his sufferings because,

84 you see, she lived for sport, too. No, Panama

would not have started complaining to her. It was just that he felt so wretched he was trying so hard and finding it all so difficult and nobody knew about it. He could not tell his parents for they might very well go and ban him from visiting the riding-school.

"I've got to make friends with Yulia," he resolved.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I GIVE UP!"

"I shouldn't have watched TV last night," thought Panama.

It was only the second lesson but he was simply dying to go to sleep. The teacher was explaining something by the blackboard, tapping away with the chalk, and the board was soon covered with numbers. Every time Panama's eyes lingered on them for slightly too long, they started closing of their own accord. "Square brackets ... round brackets... Multiplication and division come before subtraction and addition... Their colours are known as follows: dappled grey, light chestnut, black, bay and roan. Thoroughbred jumpers are mostly bay... When dividing a simple fraction the divisor's denominator is written up... In order to urge your horse into a canter

on the near side you first must give him the right command, that is, turn his head with the rein so that you can just see his right eye..."

A painful blow in the side made Panama open his eyes. He found he was sitting on the floor next to his desk and all his classmates were roaring with laughter and completely ignoring their teacher who was pounding her palm against the table. The class was in an uproar! No wonder—it wasn't every day that a pupil fell asleep during a lesson and fell off his seat!

That day Panama took the following note home in his daily report: "Interrupted the mathematics lesson. Distracted. Working less satisfactorily." Fortunately, his father would only sign the report on Saturday and he would only get into hot water then.

"Oh," he said to himself. "Today's Wednesday—today we've got vaulting." And the muscles in his arms and legs started aching.

To start off with, they warmed up in the ring.

"Lie down! Sit up! Lie down! Sit up! Pick up the skipping ropes! Run with the skipping ropes!"

Panama swung the skipping rope round but it kept hitting him on the neck and it seemed

86 very likely that he would strangle himself.

"Squat down and goose-step march!"

Panama groaned and felt that his legs had gone numb. In fact, he felt he had nothing up to his chest and that he had already turned into the stone bust which had been standing in their street since time immemorial...

But the worst was still to come. Lafet, a huge bay, was cantering round the ring and, one after the other, they had to jump into his saddle.

For Panama jumping onto the huge horse was just like jumping onto the roof of a moving bus and jumping off, like jumping off a parachute tower.

"Bichun!"

Well, Misha would jump over the moon if he had to. First he shifted from one foot to the other and then he ran alongside the horse, grabbed onto the saddle with his thin sinewy hands and was up in the saddle in a flash and cantering along...

"Ponomariev!"

Panama was also determined to do everything as easily as Bichun. He shifted from one foot to the other, ran up and struck the horse's side.

"What on earth are you doing, boy?" shouted the instructor. **"Why butt the horse? Try again!"**



Panama trod ground again, quickly ran up, eyes shut, jumped and hit his head against the wall! Too late! The horse had already cantered past!

“Oh, I give up! I give up!” he mumbled and tears spilled from his eyes. No wonder after banging himself so hard! And a huge bump was swelling on his forehead.

“You can cut that out!” shouted the instructor. “We don’t want the ground damp in here or the horses’ll get thrush! Incidentally, what’s thrush? Ponomariev?”

“A disease,” replied Panama, sobbing, “caused by damp ground...”

“Be more precise! Bichun!”

“It’s an inflammation affecting the frog of
88 a horse’s foot. It is caused by...”

“Why am I putting myself through all this?” wondered Panama. “Whatever happens, I’ll never learn to jump like Bichun. So why do it? I can live perfectly well without it. Take dad, for instance, he’s no good at any sport but he’s still ever so fit! Yes, I’ve picked a really old-fashioned sort of sport! The clever ones go to the photo or radio club but I, like a fool, have gone and chosen horses! No, I’ll give it all up!”

And these thoughts even made him happier.

He walked down the street on his way home, trying to swing his bag but his arms ached too much after the lesson. He could not walk fast either because his legs ached as well.

“I’ll give it up, I’ll give it up!” he repeated to himself. “Just think how many lads have already dropped out. And I’ve got a right old so-and-so for an instructor, too... Why, in the next group they take it easy riding and they’ve already started jumping fences while we’re still on the ‘up-down-undo your stirrups’ routine. He should just try riding without stirrups during a whole lesson! He does it on purpose and, what’s more, he cracks his whip too. He may be old but he’s ever so bad-tempered! I’ll give it up! I’ll give it up tomorrow. I can’t go on any more!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A WOMAN'S TEARS

Panama turned into his gate-way. In the yard there was a small garden and a sand-pit where the little children used to play during the day and where the older boys gathered in the evenings and strummed a guitar until the yard-keeper chased them away. Now it was dark and chilly and there was nobody about. No, there was someone! Yes, and that someone was coming up to him! What do you know, it was Masha Ugolkova!

"Hello, Igor!"

"Hello. What are you doing?"

"Oh, nothing. Igor, don't worry! Here, take this..." And she pushed into his hands a bundle out of which coins started spilling and jingling noisily, and a shiny ring rolled along the pathway.

"Masha, have you gone mad? What are you giving me this for?"

"Do take it, do take it! Now they won't hurt you any more!"

"Who?" asked Panama, nonplussed.

"Those louts!" Masha whispered.

Panama just stared at her in bewilderment.

"Igor, I was looking at you today in our
90 PT lesson when we were playing tag. Why,

you're covered in bruises and weals. Igor, you've run into debts with those louts, haven't you? Do tell me! You have, haven't you? I've guessed right? Well, here's some money and a ring," she said, crawling about in the sand and picking up the scattered coins. "And I can ask my gran for more and she'll give it to me and then you can pay them back. Igor, you've got nothing to be afraid of! They've caught you and got you all tied up. You're never at home and you're always dashing out of school... I've wanted to have a chat with you for a long time, but I couldn't very well chase after you. But today I decided I'd wait for you even if it meant staying here all night long. I just can't stand by and watch a person going to the dogs."

"Have you got a screw loose or something, Masha? Girls, I tell you, they're for ever inventing the wildest of things. They watch too much TV and then start imagining goodness knows what!" he said, nearly choking with indignation.

And then he heard a strange high-pitched sound: "A-a-ah..." It was Masha crying.

"Oh, stop bawling!"

But Masha merely flapped her hands, stood up and walked away, her shoulders shuddering and the pompom on her hat wobbling. 91

"Stop, Masha! Oh, why are you crying? Oh, do wait. Please, Masha!"

But she just went on sobbing.

"Listen, will you, only please don't tell anyone else for the time being!"

The sobbing grew quieter.

"I'm learning to ride at the riding-school." Panama was surprised how grand this sounded.

"You don't want to tell me the truth," she stammered through her tears.

"No, cross my heart! Ask Boris Stepanovich, he rides there too. It was he who get me in there!"

"You mean, you're learning to ride?" gasped Masha.

"Yes, not just to sit on a horse but to ride properly," Panama stressed solemnly. "I mean, you can learn to sit astride anything."

"Gosh, Igor, you're so brave! I've never gone near a horse. I'm even scared of mice."

"Oh, there's nothing to it," replied Panama and then feeling rather awkward, added, "Actually, I'm scared of mice too."

"Even so, even so, you're ever so brave! Igor, will it ever be possible for me to watch you riding there?"

"Training," Panama corrected her. "Why-
92 ever not! Of course, you can. When the com-

petitions are being held, you can come along and I'll get you a ticket and introduce you to the others."

"Can't I come to one of your lessons?"

Panama imagined Masha in her clean smart dress watching them, spinning round the dusty ring, dirty and sweaty and bad-tempered, and the whip cracking.

"Oh, the lessons are dull," he said. "Look, it'll soon be competition time—you can come along then. Boris Stepanovich will be competing."

"But what sort of competition is it?"

"Show jumping in an indoor arena."

Why, it wasn't for nothing Denis Platonovich made them memorize long phrases out of the equestrian handbook. At the most awkward moment when the whole group was cantering round the ring, he was very likely to shout out, "You, on Vermouth, explain in detail how you get your horse to walk forward!"

"You squeeze with your legs, tighten your reins, draw them closer to your body until your horse takes a step back and then you release them slightly and at the same time grip with your knees and lean forward... And when you're cantering, you've got to keep him in check too."

"I can't hear you! Stop mumbling! Lift your chin up! Where are your heels! Go through saddling!.."

"The competition consists of jumping over fences arranged in a set pattern and about one metre thirty high."

"But what if you get them in the wrong order?" asked Masha anxiously.

"You're knocked out of the competition. That's what happened once in the Olympic Games and the rider just missed a gold. But they're usually arranged in the same order."

Panama came home late.

"Why are you so late?" asked his mother. "You know I worry enough about you as it is. Why, when I see you off to your riding-school, I feel as if it's the front you're leaving for!"

"Oh, I was just walking about near the house," replied Panama, devouring his supper with gusto.

When he slipped under the blanket, he somehow did not feel at all sleepy.

"Dad!"

"What?" came his father's sleepy reply.

"It seems I can't bear to see a woman crying..."

"You've inherited that from me... Go to sleep," replied his father.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CAVALETTI, FENCES, FALLS...

Before learning to jump fences, you do an exercise called "cavaletti". The horse simply steps over a series of poles, one end of which is lying on the ground while the rider lowers the reins and acts just as if he were actually jumping.

"Look!" said Bichun, "what fences they have been jumping in the first group for a long time while we're still on 'cavaletti'."

It was now winter and sparkling little white snowflakes fell onto the horses' backs when they were led across the yard to the stables. Panama could feel how much his body had changed. It was as if he had completely dried up: his stomach muscles were now taut and as hard as rocks and his legs were very strong and he could do up to a hundred knee-bends in one go. And he no longer bounced about in the saddle but sat firmly and confidently, wasting little energy and treating the horse gently. He could now saddle a horse with his eyes closed in one and a half minutes.

"Attention! In today's lesson we shall be jumping fences thirty centemetres high. Mount! Warm up your horses!"

“At last,” thought Panama, riding round the ring, volte to the left, volte to the right, walk, trot. “At last, the most interesting part is starting today. We’re going to jump.”

Denis Platonovich leapt up into the saddle in a flash, sharply drew in the reins, rose into a trot and then a canter.

“Jump!” he shouted and the horse flew over the pole. “Got it? I’ll do it again. Now try it yourselves. Ponomareiev, you first. Jump!”

Panama’s horse suddenly sank beneath him and the saddle banged him painfully.

“You got left behind! Pat your horse. Again! Right... Jump! You were in too much of a hurry. Pat your horse. Again!”

Twice, three times, seven times... Although he already understood everything, he simply could not do it.

“Ponomareiev, don’t get excited. Calm down! You’re working your horse up. Do it again!”

“Denis Platonovich,” said Panama, “help me with your whip. I simply can’t catch the right moment.”

Something twitched on the old man’s face.

“Right,” he said, “only don’t get excited.”

The long lash flicked across the sand.

“Go on! Jump!” Panama felt a short blow

96 across the top of his boot.



"Got it!" he cried out joyfully. "I've got it!"

"Of course, you have!" replied the instructor cheerfully. "You must have since you asked for the whip yourself. It seems to me, Ponomarev, that you're turning into a horseman."

At these words Panama felt a hot sensation in his chest. "May I try again?"

"Well, just once or you'll completely wear out your horse. Don't pull on the reins. Keep your hands supple at the wrists. Go on!"

The expert riders were exercising in a far corner of the ring. The school had signed a contract with a film studios and now the riders were learning trick falls. Panama walked his tired horse and watched Boris Stepanovich falling. He had urged his horse into a canter. Straps were attached to Comet's feet just above the hooves, and Boris Stepanovich was holding onto the other ends. In the split second when the horse lifted his front hooves off the ground, he had to tug on the straps in such a way that he and the horse went flying head over heels.

Every time a rider made his horse fall, Panama's heart missed a beat but at the same time he longed to have a go himself.

"Well, Igor?" shouted Boris Stepanovich, 98 "Does it look impressive?"

“Yes! Very!” replied Panama. “But aren’t you tired?”

“Oh, no time for that! We’re shooting on Tuesday and my horse is still falling badly and if he has to fall on hard ground, he might injure himself. I’ve got to teach him to fall on his side. I’m still not guiding his head with the rein properly... So I simply can’t tire yet.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

OPERATION “HORSESHOE”

It was Stolbov who thought up the name and elected himself leader. He got hold of a pair of dark glasses from somewhere which covered up half his face, a beret and he tucked his chin under his coat’s turned-up collar. All in all, he made himself look so mysterious that passersby stopped and stared back at him in surprise.

“Right!” he said two days later. “I’ve found everything out. The objective is located in the yard of a house two bus-stops away. It’s guarded by two mongrels on chains and an old woman. The old woman sometimes goes off to drink tea and is then relieved by an old man. Here’s a map of the area.”

Four heads bent over the sheet of tracing-paper.

"Is everything clear?" asked Stolbov in a whisper.

"Nopel" his accomplices whispered back.

"Here's the fence. I've already broken two planks and left them dangling on a nail. We climb through into the yard. I'll neutralize the dogs. One of the girls will keep an eye on the entrance while the other stays by the fence. You, Panama, and your partner, Bichun, will go up to the objective. When the job's done, we'll repeat the operation in reverse. The time of the operation is set for twenty hundred hours—it gets dark early these days. We'll meet by the bus-stop tomorrow. The password is 'Panama', the reply, 'Horseshoe!'"

It was an unusually nasty evening. It was drizzling and foggy and the street lights glowed dimly. Panama and Bichun jumped off the bus, glanced round and walked into the small park.

"Password!" Stolbov loomed out of the darkness.

"Horseshoe!" replied Panama.

"You're a horseshoe yourself! I mean, you're Panama and that's what the password is too. Bungled it again, bother you!.. Is that

"Yes. This is..."

"Don't!" Stolbov cut him short. "The best way not to blab is to know nothing. Well, come on, let's get going. Our people are already in their positions."

Hugging the walls of the houses, they stole up to the gate and found Yulia standing there.

"The old woman's gone off and left the old man sitting here," she informed them.

"Hush," hissed Stolbov, "do you want to wreck the whole operation?"

Masha considerably held up the planks while they scrambled through into the yard.

"Right! But where are the dogs?"

"The old man's taken them into the entrance-gate office with him."

"Better still. The way's clear. Off we go!"

"I say, have you ever done any shoeing before?" Panama asked Bichun.

"Well, not really," he replied. "But don't worry, everything will be fine. Yesterday I specially learnt by heart a chapter on shoeing in the handbook. We'll cope!"

It was dark inside the stables and the dim yellow lamp in the corridor seemed merely to emphasise this darkness.

"Well, let's start with the last one. We'll take the old shoe off first. Come on, lift your foot up! What did I say, go on! Oh, bother

you!.. Igor, let's lift his foot up together."

They pulled off one shoe and then another... The horses were munching hay and sighing sadly every now and then like old folk.

"Oh! What bad luck!" said Bichun. "Our shoes are too small."

"What can we do?" asked Stolbov.

"Nothing. We'll have to put the old ones back on again. We'll just trim the hooves and put the shoes back on firmer."

"Hang on!" said Stolbov. "Let's see if the shoes'll fit some other horse... Give me one and I'll go and check." He went off to the next stall.



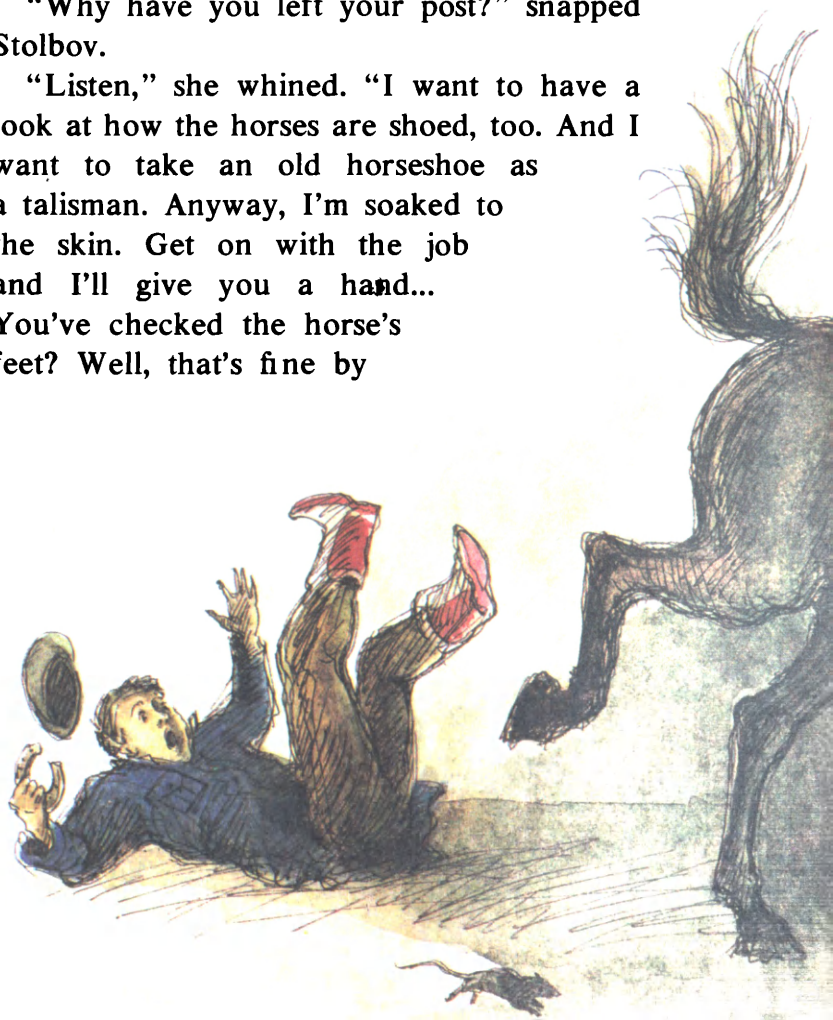
“Wait!” Bichun said, straightening up.
“There’s someone coming.”

They froze. The door creaked gently open.

“Boys!” someone whispered. “Where are you?” It was Yulia.

“Why have you left your post?” snapped Stolbov.

“Listen,” she whined. “I want to have a look at how the horses are shoed, too. And I want to take an old horseshoe as a talisman. Anyway, I’m soaked to the skin. Get on with the job and I’ll give you a hand... You’ve checked the horse’s feet? Well, that’s fine by



me, I'll just give her some hay." And she started rummaging in the feed-rack.

"Look here..." Stolbov began indignantly and then suddenly let out a strange shriek and shot back against the wall. "Oh!" he groaned, grabbing his stomach. "She kicked me! Oh, she kicked me!"

"Hush! Hush, will you!" whispered Panama.

And then such a loud scream rang out that the dogs in the office started barking.

"A rat! A rat!" shrieked Yulia hysterically.

"Run!" yelled Bichun.

They grabbed hold of Stolbov who weighed a ton, the devil, and dragged him towards the doors but just as they got there, the lock snapped shut.

"That's done it!" said Bichun despairingly. "We've had it..."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**"SMITHIE, OH, SMITHIE, MY HORSE HAS CAST
A SHOE..."**

"What's up, grandad?" asked Sergeant Nikiforov, clambering off his motorbike. He was a thick-set man and in his motorbike's headlights his shiny raincoat made him look

rather like an old whale which had hauled itself onto the shore for some reason.

Hardly managing to check the dogs, the old caretaker prattled, "As far as I can see we've got thieves!"

"So you reckon it's thieves, do you. Quiet!" Nikiforov ordered the dogs and they whined plaintively and then fell silent.

"Yes, thieves, no doubt about it! Several of them! Or maybe it's just hooligans..."

"That's more like it! Well, let's have a look who you've locked up in there."

"Um, excuse me!" Nikiforov heard a high-pitched voice.

Standing by the fence was a sopping wet little girl. Her forehead and cheeks were spotted with dewy raindrops and they kept dripping down her neck but she ignored them and simply blew them nervously off her upper lip.

"Excuse me, please, we're not thieves or hooligans..."

"Who are you then?"

"Just a group of children!"

"Well, that makes things easier!" said Nikiforov, tossing back his hood. "And there you were, grandad, going on about thieves! At least you didn't get a whole detail of us over here. So you wanted to go for a ride, did

you? Well, you've picked the wrong place. These horses are only used to take manure out to the fields."

"No, we've come here to shoe them, not ride them."

"What?"

"To shoe them because their shoes are in such a bad way..."

"Hear that, grandad? And you called them thieves! Why, they're just young blacksmiths who've come to help you out."

"No," said the girl. "Simply, Panama told us that if the horses weren't shod, their hooves would completely go to pieces by the spring."

"Well, what have you to say to that, grandad?"

"It's like this: our blacksmith's quit and there's nobody to shoe them. Well, of course, the horses' legs are suffering. But the draymen don't dare do the job."

"So you're just going to sit about and wait till the horses' hooves drop off?"

"We're looking for a blacksmith. We've put advertisements up all over the town."

"Well, why look for one when you've got several here. How many of you are there?"

"Five."

106 "You see, grandad, you've got five

blacksmiths here at once. Come on, let's open up the stables. But tie your dogs up first or they'll scare the children."

"Just a tic..." the old man started bustling about and jingling keys.

As Nikiforov drove his motorbike through the open doors, a shadow streaked past unnoticed. Three boys were huddled together in the patch of light directly ahead.

"I see!" said the militiaman. "Let's get acquainted: Sergeant Nikiforov."

"Bichun."

"Ponomarev."

"Stolbov."

"And where's the fourth one?"

The boys kept quiet.

"Don't worry," said Nikiforov. "Your friend here has already explained everything to me. Where's the fourth? Has he just slipped out the door? He's ditched you, hasn't he, and you don't want to betray him?"

"It's a she, not a he," said Stolbov. "And we'll get even with her later."

"You don't need to do that," objected Bichun. "As far as I'm concerned, she no longer exists as a person."

"You're right," agreed Stolbov. "We'll punish her by not speaking to her."

"Now, now!" said Nikiforov, walking 107

round the stables. "You do that". And all of a sudden he broke into song "Smithie, oh, smithie, my horse has cast a shoe... Smithie, oh, smithie..." he walked from one stall to the next, shining his torch. "Smithie, oh, smithie... Who's in charge here, grandad? I'll have to get an officer to visit him."

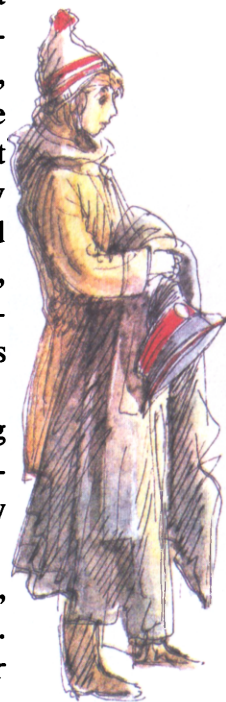
"Oh, he's been laid up in hospital for over a month now... Had a heart attack."

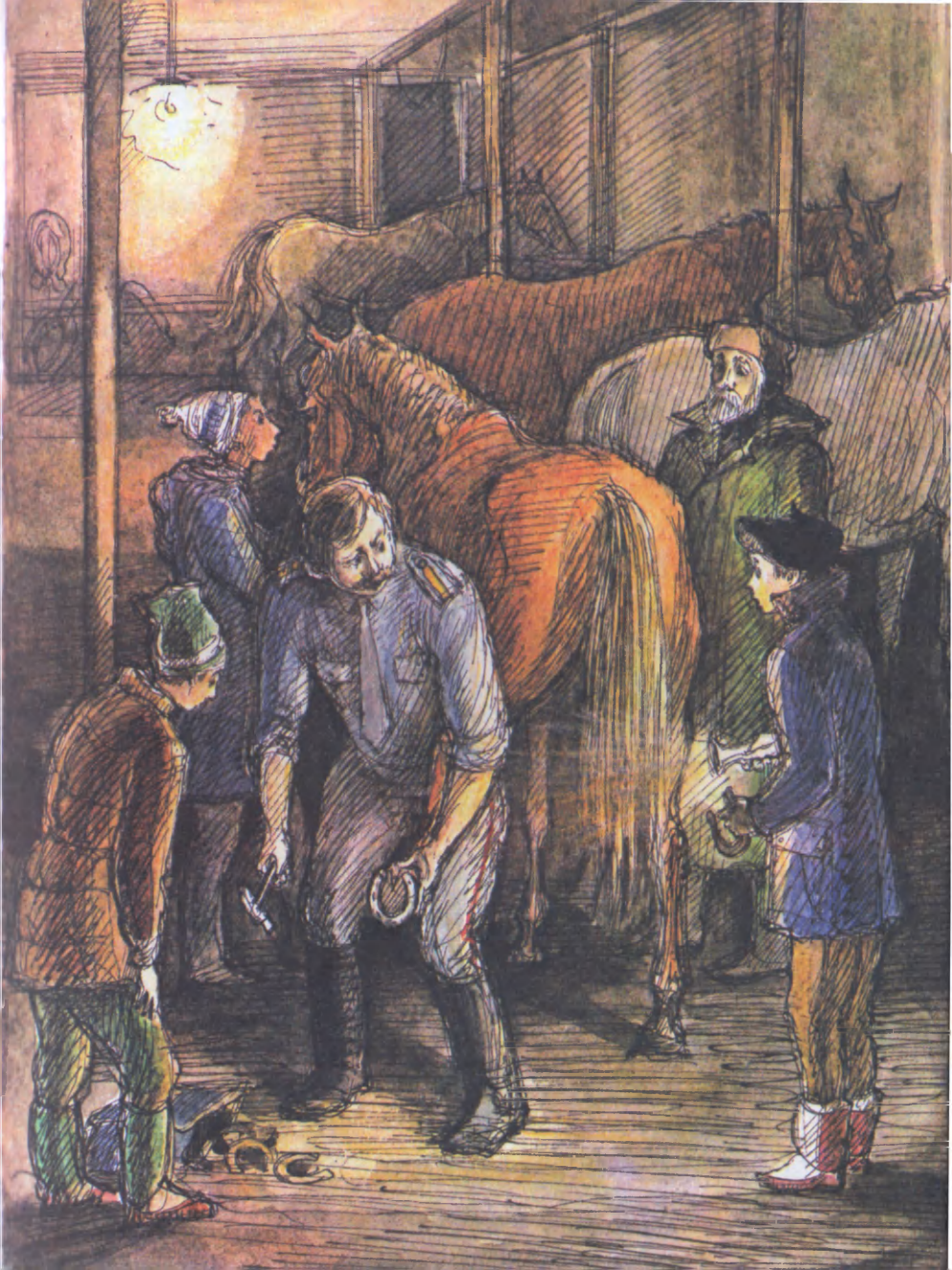
"Yes, you could get an instant heart attack just by looking at hoo-ves like these. Smithie, oh, smithie, my horse has cast a shoe... Come on, let's get this unshod horse out into the passageway." He threw off his raincoat and jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves. "Right, let's see if ex-Sergeant of the Mounted Militia Nikiforov remembers how he used to shoe horses."

He wedged the horse's hind-leg between his knees and began expertly trimming its hoof's horny edges.

"Now let's file it down. Smithie, oh, smithie... And now for the shoe. Shine the torch over here... Now for the nails... Smithie, oh, smithie..."

Now we'll snap off the ends with





some pliers. Perfect! So you decided to shoe the horses, did you? Hand me the pincers!"

"Yes, at a meeting..." Stolbov began reluctantly.

"Out with it, out with it! So, at a meeting you decided to shoe these horses."

"Yes, and Ponomariev got given the job."

"He did it on purpose," Masha added excitedly, "Vasya Moslov did it on purpose to get Igor expelled from the Young Pioneers if he didn't do the job properly..."

"Did he indeed!" Sergeant Nikiforov tilted his forage cap back on his head in surprise. "And he sent you to these stables to shoe the horses? Goodness me, sounds like something out of a fairy-tale!"

"No, I decided to do it myself," said Panama. "These horses are such a sorry sight."

"I see. And who's Moslov?"

"The council chairman of our Young Pioneer detachment."

"Throwing his weight about..." the old man sighed sadly.

"Well, why don't you elect someone else as your chairman?" asked the militiaman, hammering the last shoe. "Bring out the next one. Change him and that's all there is to it."

"That's right, that's all there is to it,"

110 echoed the old man.

"We can't," explained Masha. "Our senior Young Pioneer leader thinks very highly of him."

"Well, I'll drop by your school... Where is it?"

"Oh, there's no need to do that," said Panama, "we came here of our own accord. Nobody sent us."

"What!" Stolbov exclaimed. "Why, he told us to collect scrap paper and then go help old people by doing odd jobs for them... Only, he said, we were to make quite sure the old folks wrote letters of thanks to our school because we needed them for our report... Is that what you expect of a Young Pioneer?"

"I see. Hand me that shoe... Smithie, oh, smithie... Now, why don't you come down and see me at the station and lend me a hand."

"You mean, to catch criminals?!" gasped Stolbov. "And will you give us guns?"

"We'll be keeping an eye on the law and order! As for guns... Smithie, oh, smithie!.. We'll have to see about that..."

Next morning Panama, Stolbov and Masha ran over to watch the horses being driven out in their new shoes.

"Why, they sound quite different too," said Masha.

"Of course," said Panama, "now the shoes 111

fit properly, they don't jangle."

The different-coloured mares walked off round the town, shaking their fringes merrily, and it seemed to the children that the horses winked at them.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"WHAT A DISASTER!"

"There'll be no literature class!" yelled Sapogov, tearing into the classroom. "Beardie hasn't turned up at school."

"Hurrah!" cried the others.

Panama started. Catching Masha's frightened look, he strode quickly towards the door.

"Aha!" shouted Sapogov. "You want to slip out, do you! Well, no doing!" And he spread out his huge arms.

"Let me go," said Panama and marvelled at his shrill wavering voice. "Let me pass, I say!"

"First show me your documents!" shouted Sapogov.

But a moment later he got such a shove in the chest that he flopped down on the floor in surprise. When he came to his senses and dived out into the corridor, Panama was already in the teachers' room, dialling the riding-school's number with trembling hands.

"Hello! Who's speaking? Denis Platonovich, what's happened to Boris Stepanovich? What, he's had a bad fall? Had a bad fall! In what hospital? Oh, lessons don't matter now! But how did he... Oh, how terrible!.." he put back the receiver. Then he saw that all the teachers in the room were staring anxiously at him. "When he was shooting yesterday, Boris Stepanovich had a bad fall!" he said as if justifying himself.

"Shooting what? Where?"

But Panama had already dashed back to the classroom. He appeared with such a look on his face that Sapogov who had been waiting for him with a wet duster in his hands recoiled in shock.

"Oh, how awful, what a disaster!.." he muttered, stuffing books into his satchel. "Boris Stepanovich hurt himself badly while he was being filmed yesterday," he said and then replied to Masha's anxious look, "I don't know how. Denis Platonovich says it's very serious. When they led his horse in, his saddle was completely smashed, the stirrups broken and the girths in shreds! I'll run over to the hospital..."

But he was not allowed in to see him. The doctor on duty glanced at some papers and then asked sternly, "Who is he, your father?" 113

"No, my teacher. What's wrong with him?"
"He's broken his ribs, fractured and dislocated his radii, and, worst of all, he's fractured one of his knees and shin bones. Yes, chum, that is serious..."

"Will his leg be amputated?" asked Panama, horror-struck.

"No, but it won't be the same again. At the very best, it will be functioning properly again only in about two to three years' time. That, I repeat, is at the very best."

"And at the worst?"

"At the worst, he won't be able to bend it at the knee or the ankle."

"But then how will he be able to ride, Doctor?"

"Look here, young man, the main thing now is whether he'll be able to walk again without crutches or not, and not ride. Go home! I'm not going to let you see him—he's in no state to see you now."

"Doctor, would you please tell him not to worry about Comet. Everything will be just fine with him..."

"What comet do you mean?"

"That's his stallion. His horse. Boris Stepanovich was..." He was about to say "riding" but he swallowed the lump in his throat, and said firmly, "That's his horse!"

"I see. Well, off you go home, young man. We'll do everything possible for your teacher."

When Panama walked slowly out into the hospital garden, a cold wind was sweeping snow and dust along the asphalt.

"Ponomariev!" Looking round Panama caught sight of Denis Platonovich, prancing hurriedly along the path. "Well, how are things?" he asked, getting his breath back.

Panama told him everything.

"What a disaster!" Denis Platonovich flopped onto a bench. "Such a sportsman, such a rider, and what a man! Intelligent, well-educated, refined, kind... Lord! Lord! Why, he hurt himself badly saving his horse. The lads just told me. The horses took fright at the gun shots and bolted. The riders would have coped if there'd been more space but, you see, there was none, none at all... Straight ahead there was some sort of stone wall with a gully on the other side. It was a low wall and the horses got ready to jump. He not only prevented the first horse from jumping it but saved him by swivelling round and flinging himself against the wall and into the gully himself... And all the horses are fine, every single one of them..." He gazed proudly at Panama.



“It would have been better if the horses had got hurt rather than Boris Stepanovich!” Panama retorted angrily.

“How can you say such a thing?” asked the old instructor, throwing up his hands, “Come on, sit down here and listen to me. Of course, a man’s life is more valuable than a horse’s. But, you see, a horse is not just an ordinary animal but the product of a man’s work. Man created the horse! The horse’s ancestor is as similar to our thoroughbreds today as an aged biplane is to a jet. Yes, when a man is sick, a horse will risk its neck to save him. But when a horse is in danger a man must also do everything possible to save it! If he doesn’t, he can’t be called a man!

116 Have you understood me, boy?”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

A TELEPHONE CALL IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

"This is what I suggest: we phone the numbers on the list in turn and see what reaction we get," said the riding-school's manager.

Although it was past one o'clock at night, instructors, vet and head groom were still sitting in his office.

"I would ask you to add one more name to your list," said Denis Platonovich.

"Whose? There're already six as it is..."

"Ponomariiev's. He can be number seven."

"Who's he?"

"You'll soon find out," said the old instructor with a wry grin. "Believe you me, he 117

deserves to be ranked alongside all the others."

"Oh, alright then. I'll start now," the riding-school's manager picked up the receiver. "Please excuse me for phoning so late but could I speak to..." He gave a name. "Is that you? I'm phoning you from the riding-school. Comet is sick and we don't know what to do. Yes? You suggest we wake up the head groom? Call the vet? The ambulance? Right. But couldn't you come over? No, I'm not joking. Yes, it really is hard to catch a taxi. Well, I'm sorry!" The manager hung up and crossed out the first name on the list so vigorously that his pencil tore through the sheet of paper...

Panama was dreaming in colour and smacking his lips with pleasure when the telephone rang in the apartment.

His father felt for his slippers with his bare feet and shuffled into the front room.

"Yes!" he said in a hoarse sleepy voice, "He's asleep. He's got to get up early tomorrow. What are you thinking of—at this time of night! Well, alright, I'll try... Yes, yes, I understand!"

Panama was dreaming of a sunny sky, and a green field which they were galloping over—he, Masha, Yulia and, oddly enough,

Stolbov. The horses were speeding along smoothly, as if through the air because they were not trampling the grass underfoot. "How are you galloping like this?" Panama asked his horse and the horse turned his head towards him and suddenly said in his father's voice, "Igor, Igor, it's someone from the riding-school on the phone... Comet's sick..."

"What?" murmured Panama, hardly able to unstick his eyelids. "What?" he shrieked when it had sunk in. "Coming, coming..."

He started hurriedly grabbing his clothes.

"What's happened to him?" he yelled down the receiver. "Is he lying down? He's probably been overfed again. I'll be right over..."

Some objection was raised on the other end of the receiver but Panama was no longer listening.

"Have you gone mad!" exclaimed his parents, standing in the doorway.

"Mum and dad!" he pleaded. "You see, the horse may die..."

His parents exchanged glances.

"I'm going with you!" said his father. "First of all, because it's night-time... And, secondly, because perhaps I'll be able to help in some way too."

"Yes! And you reckon I'm going to sit here worrying myself sick?" asked Panama's moth- 119

er. "I'm going too. At least now I'll see what your school's like. It must be coated in honey or something for my only son to be leaving home soon and moving into a stable."

They dressed quickly and rushed out into the street. They were lucky and got a passing car to give them a lift.

"What's wrong with Comet?" asked Panama, barging into the manager's office.

Everyone in there turned round and an awkward silence ensued.

"Everything's all right!" said Denis Platonovich cheerfully. "Everything's all right, boy. Well done! Are these your parents? It's a pleasure to meet you... You have a good, kind boy..."

"What shall we tell him?" asked the manager hesitantly.

"No, do you really intend to solve this serious matter in such a flippant manner?" asked one of the instructors indignantly.

"Why's it flippant?" asked Denis Platonovich. "It's the most correct way. But I think we should do it with more pomp and ceremony... After the exams, I suggest... I'm sorry, there's been a small misunderstanding," he concluded, bowing to Panama's parents.

Panama had never seen his instructor looking so jolly. "Why's he so pleased?" he wondered. "No, there's something behind all this!"

They went outside. It was uncannily silent for a town. Large fluffy snowflakes were falling slowly from the darkness above, glinting silver in the street lamplight, and settling smoothly on their shoulders and the houses around.

"What an amusing little hoax," said Panama's father, "getting people up at two in the morning just to say hello. Whatever next!"

"If you ask me, there's something going on!" said Panama's mother. "But Igor acted correctly! Remember how delighted his instructor was with him..."

"Oh just look!" said Panama. "Just look what a beautiful night it is! Just like New Year's Eve! It's a good thing they woke us up or we'd have gone on sleeping and missed all this! How quiet it is! And the snowflakes are falling slowly just like the Snow Queen's letters..."

His mother stopped, caught a snowflake on her sleeve and said, "Dad, don't you think your son is turning into a poet?"

"I think he's got more than tonight's escapade in store for us. This dash over the stables 121

is just a prelude. The fugue's yet to come..."

"Oh, stop grumbling!" said Panama's mother, rolling a snowball and tossing it at her husband's back.

"Wait!" he said. "I've got an idea. Let's make a snowman and put him in the middle of the crossroads like a traffic warden. How about it?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

"YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND A THING!"

Panama walked along the snowy street with a bouquet of flowers wrapped in several layers of paper in his arms, and with Masha Ugolkova on one side and Yulia Fomina on the other. They were on their way to Boris Stepanovich's house.

To start off with, Panama had intended going there alone but Masha had exclaimed anxiously, "But how can you go empty-handed? You simply must buy some flowers! But you won't be able to choose them yourself so I'd better go along too, although I feel terribly awkward about going!" And Yulia Fomina had simply come up to him and said, "Are you going to see Boris Stepanovich? I'll come too."

The sun was shining and sunbeams kept dancing and leaping across the walls of houses and sides of buses, and trying to jump into people's eyes and the passersby all had very funny expressions on their faces because they kept frowning and turning away.

"It's open!" called a familiar voice from the other side of the door. "What a surprise! Come in! And flowers too! Why, thank you, thank you..."

Boris Stepanovich was sitting in an arm-chair, thin and pasty-looking, with his leg stretched out awkwardly but he was smiling so radiantly that the children soon forgot all about his illness.

They cheerfully told him about everything at school. Panama had never seen Yulia roar with laughter so much. "How beautiful she is," he thought, "even her eyes are laughing and her hair's so lovely and thick. And she seems so grown-up."

"Would you like me to make coffee for you all?" she asked. "When we were at a competition in Sweden, I learnt to make wonderful coffee. All the Swedes drink it this way in the mornings..."

"Oh, don't trouble yourself," said Boris Stepanovich. But Yulia was already bustling about with the pans in the kitchen.

"Have you any Arabic coffee?"

"Heaven knows," said Boris Stepanovich, "I don't buy it regularly."

"But you must always have coffee in stock."



Boris Stepanovich leant over to Masha and asked in a conspiratorial tone, "And can you make coffee too?"

"No," she replied quietly. She had kept quiet all the time and was sitting aloofly on the side.

"Neither can I," Boris Stepanovich winked at her and started laughing.

"But, you know, I can make beetroot soup!" said Masha, beaming, "and pancakes with meat and pies."

"Wonderful! Well, when my new leg grows, Igor and I will drop by and have lunch with you. Mind you, he mustn't be fed too much or he'll suffer like Fred Palmer did. During the fifteen years he worked at the world's top racecourses, he had to shed five tons of

weight in steam baths. But I don't reckon you've anything to worry about, Igor."

"Here's the coffee!" said Yulia, bringing in a tray laid with small cups. "Help yourselves to sugar."

The door banged in the corridor.

"Oh, you've got guests!" said a beautiful girl, walking into the room. "On the staircase I wondered where the delicious smell of coffee was coming from."

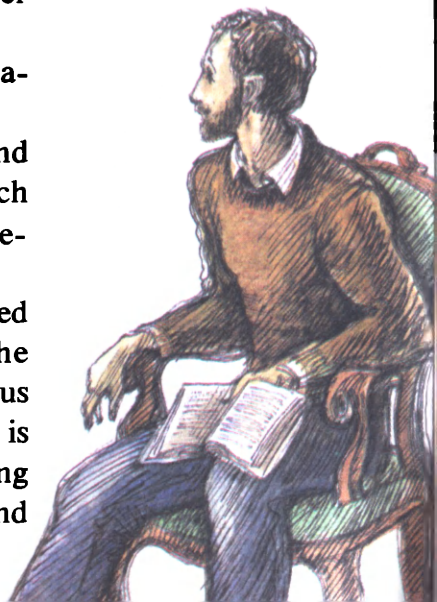
"Our culinary genius Yulia has made it for us," said Boris Stepanovich. "Well, go and freshen up and then come and join us."

"Is that your sister?" asked Yulia and Panama thought her voice sounded rather odd.

"No," replied Boris Stepanovich.

The girl came back and she and Boris Stepanovich began gaily discussing something.

"Yes! I haven't introduced my guests to you," said the teacher. "This is our famous rider, Ponomariev, this is Yulia—our future ice skating champion, I've no doubt. And



this is Masha..."

"Who's completely run-of-the-mill," Masha said with a laugh.

"That's not true. You're my favourite pupil."

"I'm sorry. I've got to go off to a training session," said Yulia. "Good-bye."

"But drink your coffee first."

"No, I'd better go. I must!" she said, leaving quickly.

"What did she run off for?" Panama asked Masha when they were walking back down the street. "I don't think she had training session today."

"Oh, really!" replied Masha. "You don't understand a thing!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN...

The first lesson was history. Maria Alexandrovna stared round the class and said, "Yulia Fomina isn't here. Poor girl... It's because of what happened yesterday."

"What happened?" Panama asked Stolbov.

"Oh, straw-brains, Panama!" replied Stolbov. "Don't you ever watch TV?"

"I've no time," replied Panama sheepishly.

126 "Our champion blew it yesterday! Fell

three times! She didn't even get placed. Serves her right! She shouldn't show off so. The German girl she beat last year has got even with her now..."

"Stolbov!"

"I won't do it again, Maria Alexandrovna."

"Well, I suppose, it really does serve her right," thought Panama, recalling Yulia's stuck-up walk, and her bossy manner. "She was so condescending with everyone. She was a disloyal friend, too, and she only thought about herself. Fancy her leaving them all in the stables! It was a good thing it had all turned out all right... Now she was most likely sitting at home and crying bitterly. Nobody would come and see her because she had spurned them all. She regards us all as children and herself as a grown-up... Well, now she can sit there and stew..."

And then suddenly Panama felt sorry for her. With painful clarity he remembered the evening when he had decided to give up riding. Why, if it had not been for Masha, he would definitely have chucked it in! And then he would really have regretted it because now he could not imagine his life without horses...

"And it'll be the same with her! If someone isn't with her now, she'll give up skating and then she'll be miserable for the rest of her 127

life. Oh, of course she will! Yes, I'll go and see her!" he resolved. "Maybe she won't show me the door."

He stood in front of the leatherette-covered door for a long while until he finally plucked up courage to press the button.

"What do you want?" Yulia asked, opening the door.

Although it was dark on the landing, he could still see her hunched shoulders and tear-stained puffy eyes.

"I've brought you your homework!" he said and quickly pushed his way through the door.

"You can't come in! And I don't need my homework!"

"Well, since I'm here anyway..." he said, taking his coat off.

"What are you taking your coat off for?"

"It's too hot inside in a coat."

"I'm not asking you inside."

"My, it's dark here!" he said and walked into the room.

It was untidy. There were things scattered about and the bed was unmade.

"What were you doing? Lying down or something?" he asked.

"None of your business! Give me my homework and clear off!"

"Look, can you swallow your pride?"

"What?"

"If you really need to. Take me, for instance, you're being unkind to me but I'm swallowing my pride and I don't mind a bit because you're being unkind to me for no reason. You see, I haven't even come here to feel sorry for you—I didn't even watch TV last night... Look, why don't we go out to the cinema!"

"There's nothing I haven't already seen..."

"Well, let's go to the ice-cream parlour then. I've got a ruble!"

"What are you pestering me for? What do you want?"

"Well, let's try and get through to you in a more straightforward way—the way you use a whip when you're jumping," he thought. At difficult moments he often caught himself reasoning as if he was riding a tricky horse.

"Look, what are you being such a cry-baby for—you've lost a competition but so what!" he said. "Boris Stepanovich nearly lost a leg but he's still smiling..." However, he at once realised he would get nowhere this way. "Hopeless!" he said to himself. "I've started off on the wrong leg. No, I'll have to try something else. Come on, let's start all over again."

"Oh, he could have broken his neck for all I care!"

"What! Why, and he praised you so! He said you were such a good girl. You had such great willpower and purposefulness and you were so beautiful..."

"Did he really say that?"

"Yes, he did. And you were wrong to go running off like that the other day. He showed us some photographs. He's worked as a stunt-man in a lot of films."

Yulia listened attentively.

"He also said that people should follow your example because you know how to plan your day..." he went prattling on. "Only none of it's true."

"What do you mean?"

"You've no willpower. It only takes one little setback for you to give up..."

"You call that a little setback!.. Why, the whole world saw me fall. 'Fominal! The Soviet Union!' And I went crashing onto the ice once, twice, three times!.. How am I going to show my face in the street now!"

"How about us going out in a group? Let's call Masha and Stolbov along. You won't be so noticeable in a group. But you can't stay moping at home—you've got to get out in the fresh air..."

"Do you think they'll go?"

"Why, of course, they'll go anywhere!"

"Well, alright," said Yulia, "sit here while I go and change."

Panama jumped for joy. "Oh, she's not so bad after all. But Masha's better. Masha's cleverer and, to my mind, more beautiful."

And all of a sudden Panama caught himself thinking that Masha, Yulia and Stolbov all seemed quite different to him now, as if he was looking down at them all from a saddle. "What's happened?" he wondered. "Have I grown up a bit?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE BIG COMPETITION

"Look at that!" said the groom, handing Panama the curry comb clogged with horse fur. "It's spring, mate! They're shedding their winter coats."

Spring was rattling the ice in drainpipes, sending sparrows twittering across the squares and gardens, and sprinkling the lawns with the first shoots of green grass.

Ponomariev tore between his classes and the riding-school. The academic year was ending at both. Igor had grown and his voice 131

was beginning to break. Denis Platonovich no longer called him "boy" but more often "Igor" or "Ponomariev".

"A big competition is being held here tomorrow, so come earlier, Igor, and help me dress."

"Right," he replied.

It was an old tradition to help the instructor dress before the competition and such an honour was bestowed only on his very best pupils. After coming straight from the barber's the following day, Igor felt proud and happy as he stood in the instructor's room, holding his clothes on a hanger for him.

The old man's face was cleanly shaven, and his hair neatly waved. He spent a long time combing his moustache in front of the mirror.

"Jodhpurs!" he ordered without turning round and slipped into his narrow white jodhpurs. "Boots...



Oh! Oh!.." he started wheezing as he pulled on the high thin leather boots. "Damn that bootmaker for making such ridiculous tops. Why, they're more like tight-fitting gloves than boots..."

At last he pulled the shiny black boots on and walked about, clicking the high heels.

"Jacket!"

The soft dark-blue jacket with its velvet collar and cuffs hung well on his shoulders. Igor was wearing exactly the same outfit, except his jacket was dark-red.

"Well, it's time to be off!" said the instructor, tidying his shirt's lace front.

And then they rode out onto the race-course's green track where jumps with brightly striped sides were set up. The band was playing loudly, the spectators talking noisily in the stands and the horses nervously stamping their slender feet.

And so the competition began. From high up in the main box the judge followed the competitors with his eyes and looked as if he had just eaten something tart.

"Goodness me, are they all going to jump like this?" he asked in a bored tone, watching yet another rider trying in vain to get his horse over a jump.

"They usually ride better. I don't know 133

what's wrong with them today. It must be nerves..." a woman instructor said in her pupils' defence.

"No, they're just riding about, not jumping. Why, they should be cantering about in the park instead..."

The judge's steward, a small old man in a dress coat, took off his pince-nez and said, wiping it, "One has the impression that some of the young men are having difficulty telling their horse's head and tail apart... Yes, it's a very sad spectacle indeed."

"The fences are rather high," rejoined a journalist who was sitting in the judges' box.

"No, they're the standard size," objected Denis Platonovich, without turning round.

"A bad workman," added the riding-school's manager in a hoarse angry tone, "always blames his tools... His nails, for instance!"

"Well, Denis Platonovich, if your young hussars are going to ride like this, I'll have to invite you to the circus," said the steward, chuckling spitefully. "To make up, so to speak, for today's poor performance. Ha, ha, ha!"

134 "Well, who's next on the programme?" the judge glanced at the list. "Right, Pono-

mariev. He got Nero in the draw... Well, let's see what this young man's got to offer us."

Panama's arms were shaking and his cold hands were jumping about like frogs. Nero, too, was snorting nervously and stamping his hooves.

"Look!" said Bichun, "Nero's raring to go just like a top show jumper." He tried to joke but his lips were frozen with excitement.

"Number sixteen, please!"

"That's me!" said Panama and his heart felt like a hot lump pounding in his chest.

"No," he thought, "I can't ride like this, I've got to calm down. I must think of something pleasant and soothing." He recalled the cinema where the four of them had gone and how they had eaten ice-creams in the foyer, and how Stolbov had pulled such funny faces that they almost got sent out of the cinema. And Yulia had laughed too. And when they were seeing her home, she had suddenly turned and said, "I love you all very much. I'd have completely gone to pieces without you!"

And now all three—Masha, Yulia and Stolbov—were sitting somewhere in the stands and keeping their fingers crossed for him.

"Come on, mount!" Bichun hurried him.
"Right, I'll hold the stirrup. There you go! 135

Everything's fine! You look splendid! Don't pull on the reins and everything will be all right. Well, off you go!"

Panama rode out into the sunlit arena. Waves of sound came booming from the stands. Festive little flags flapped and the freshly painted jump fences sparkled.

Panama drew in the reins sharply and the horse broke into a collected canter down the middle of the arena. He turned and bowed to the judges. Well, at least he could do one thing well. It was not for nothing that Denis Platonovich had spent a whole lesson teaching them. You had to take your hat off in two movements and then sharply bow your chin to your chest.

"Is that one of yours?" asked the steward in the judges' box.

"Yes!" replied the old instructor.

"Well, you've certainly taught them to bow. Now let's see how you've taught them to ride..."

Ding-a-ling! went the judges' bell and Panama directed Nero towards the first jump. The horse was going very fast but it seemed to Panama that everything was moving along smoothly and slowly as in a dream. The noise of the stands hushed, the sun dimmed and

136 only he and the horse, breathing hotly, were

left. Jump! It seemed to take an eternity.

"Gosh," said the journalist in the judges' box, "he jumped that with plenty to spare!"

"I take my words back!" said the spiteful old man. "This lad of yours is very impressive."

"He's sitting very freely and well!" said the journalist.

"He's been taught to sit well, so that's how he's sitting—he wouldn't come off even if he was tipped upside down!" said the chairman cheerfully.

"Let's see how he tackles the hardest jump," retorted the old man in the dress coat.

The hardest jump was a fence followed by a wide ditch, which so far none of the riders had managed to get his horse over.

Panama urged his horse into a short canter, leaning forward slightly in the saddle. The fence's planks loomed ahead. For a split second Panama faltered and at once felt Nero was about to break into a trot. He started to jiggle the reins.

"Nero, my lovely," he urged. "Come on, come on!"

But the horse slowed down as if on purpose: he remembered that two riders that day had already got this far on him and stopped.

"Oh, will you get on or won't you!" Pa-

nama shouted and dug his spurs in. The horse lunged forward. "Oh!" Panama thought in dismay. "I've lost the pace! Now I won't be able to give the command properly! Well, come on, come on! My beauty! Now jump!" And he hit the horse with his whip.

The horse obeyed the command and soared over the jump.

Denis Platonovich mopped his brow with his stiffly starched handkerchief.

CONCLUSION

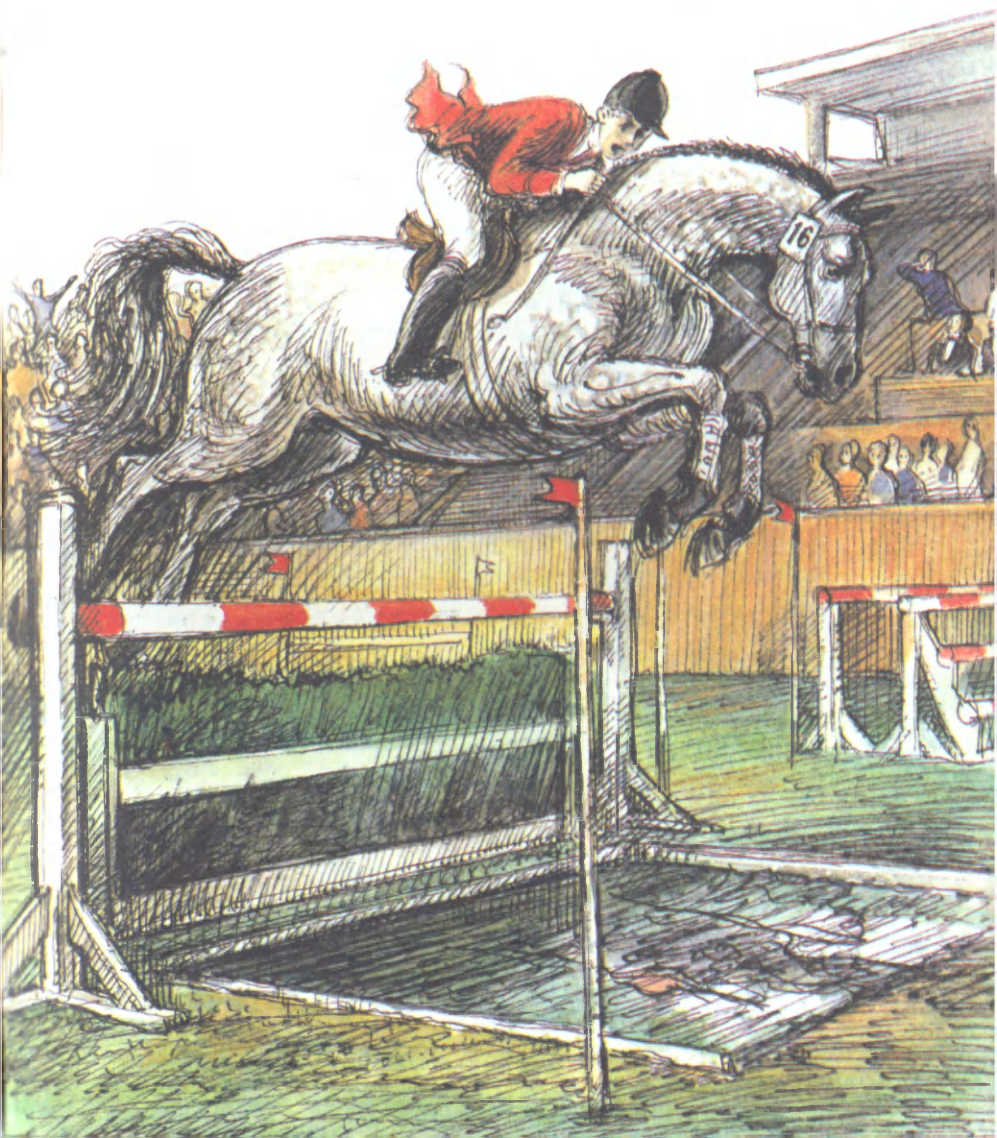
THE MOST BEAUTIFUL HORSE

"School, align! Attention!"

The rows of riders, instructors, grooms and vets all stood still. All you could hear was the horses' bridles jingling and the flags rattling in the frolicksome spring breeze.

"Today we are giving grades to our pupils! During your riding course you have not only received a very comprehensive and specialized training, but you have also learned to love and feel compassion for your horses and to get the better of yourselves. For otherwise equestrian sport would be impossible..."

Ponomariev listened to every word and
138 watched the old riders' solemn faces on the



stands. He caught sight of Denis Platonovich standing next to the old steward in the dress coat.

"In accordance with the rules of our school, young riders are given horses which are to be considered their responsibility from now on. I hope that you will not only gain a rapport with your horses but that you will always be friends with each other like your instructors and senior riders.

"The horses!"

A group of men leading saddled horses started walking ceremoniously away from the stables.

"What's this?" wondered Panama. "Why, there's Comet! Comet! Boris Stepanovich's horse!" He did not even see the man leading him. Then the line of horses turned round.

"Why, it's Boris Stepanovich!" Ponomarev almost exclaimed aloud. Limping heavily on his lame leg, his teacher was leading the horse.

"Would Igor Vladimirovich Ponomarev please come up to the qualifying committee's table!"

At first he did not register who they meant.

"Will you please sign here and there," said the secretary.

Panama wrote his signature on some papers.

"Give the horse to his new owner!"

Boris Stepanovich led Comet towards Panama.

"Well," he said, "take him."

"What?" asked Panama, bewildered.

"Not what but who. Take Comet!"

"No!" Panama almost shouted out. "He's your horse. I can't possibly take him! Please..."

"No, he's your horse, now," replied his teacher. "I'm sick and the horse needs work. So from now on he's going to be yours. You deserved him."

"How?"

"By being kind," said Denis Platonovich, coming up. "You remember how you rushed over to him in the middle of the night?.. So look after him!"

"Good-bye, my darling!" said Boris Stepanovich, pressing his face against the horse's head, and they both kept still.

Panama was on the brink of tears. Boris Stepanovich kissed the horse on his velvety nostrils. He was pale and his lips were quivering.

"Take him then," he said, handing the rein to Panama. "Everything's all right. I'm glad he's going to you and not just anybody."

At the early morning hour when road-sweepers water the streets and tiny rainbows shimmer over their hoses, three horsemen ride across the town. Hearing after so long the unfamiliar clatter of hooves in the town's streets, passersby stop and glance round, and an unusual expression appears on their faces.

The three horsemen—a handsome grey-haired old man and two boys—sit agilely on their sleek horses, their red jackets, white jodhpurs and shiny black boots reflected on the wet light-blue road surface.

Vehicles make way for them, traffic lights wink merrily at them and even the horses on the monuments' pedestals seem to salute them joyfully.

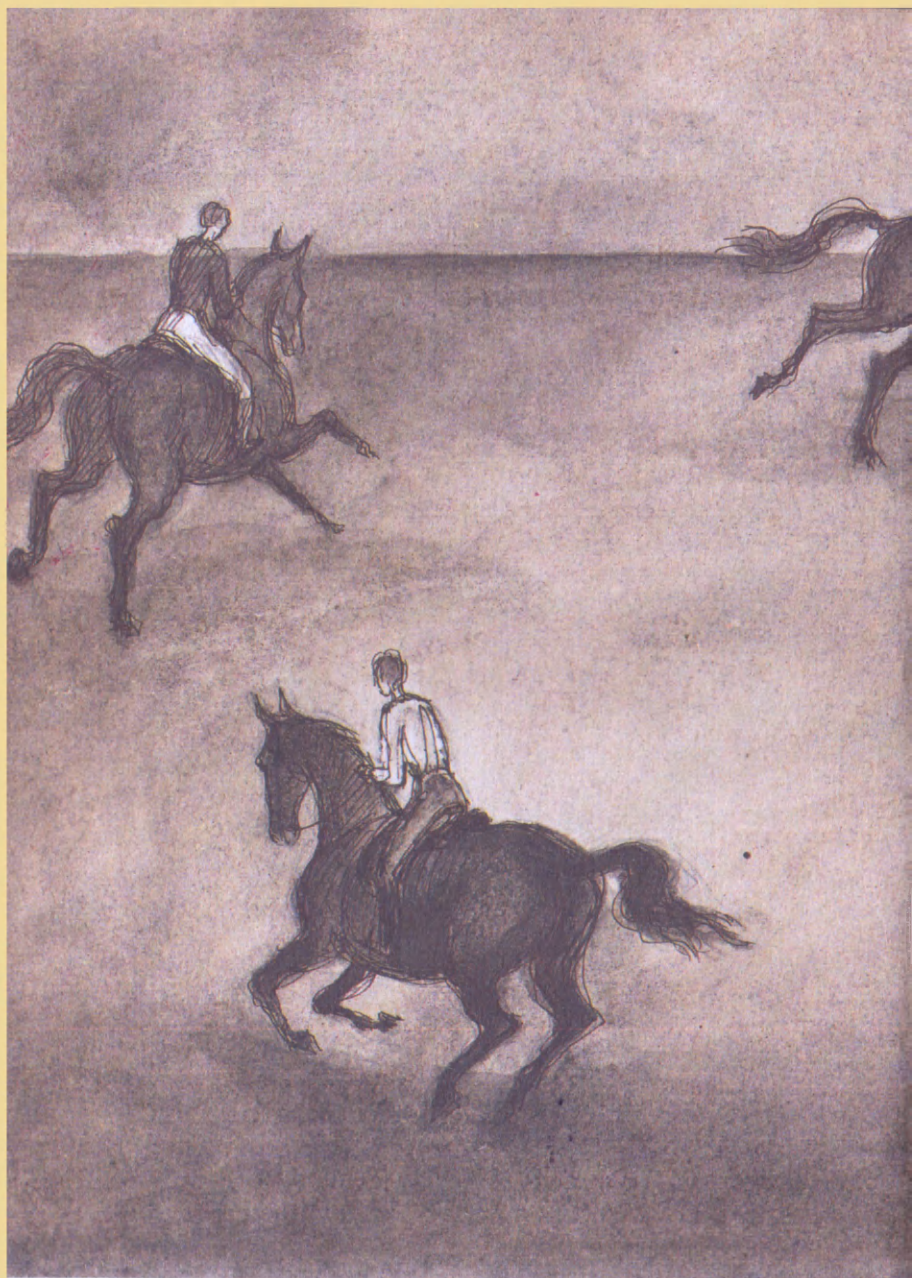


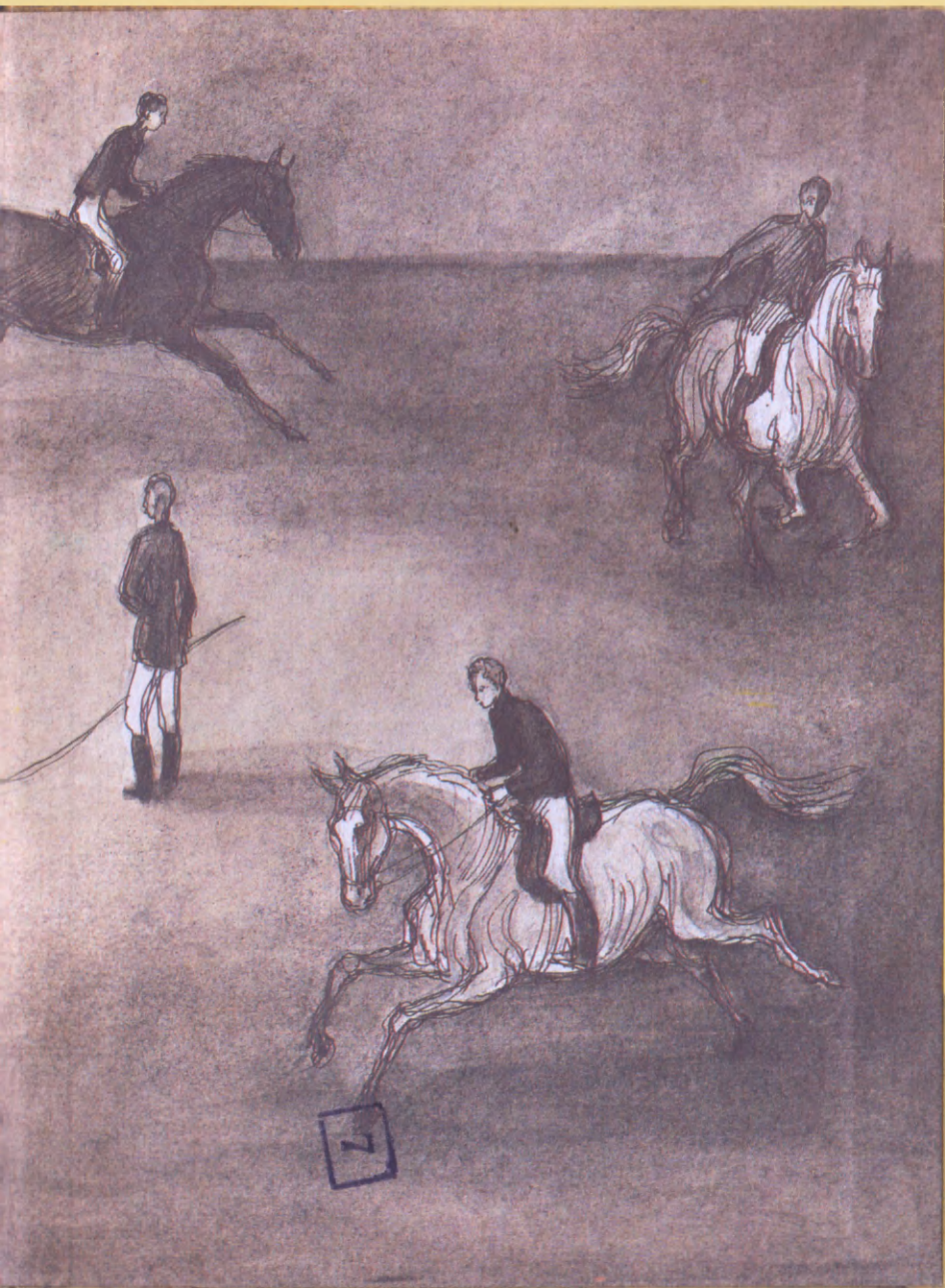


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